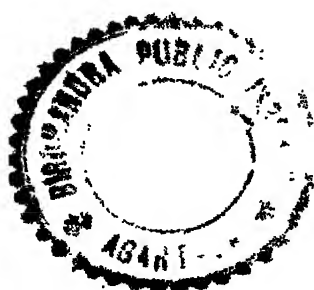


# *Hell's Pavement*

by

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## Chapter I

'My dear, have you seen Saintly Sarah this morning?'  
'No. Why?'

'She looks as if she'd seen a ghost.'

'Really?'

Diana, her fingers poised over her typewriter, looked at her more volatile colleague with a certain disapproval. Frances was always getting worked up over something. And when she was excited her voice went high, and her words slurred into one another. Rather common, it sounded. Diana's own accent was professional, carefully modulated. She used it at home now, as well as at the hospital. She was climbing briskly; she did not intend to remain an almoner's typist for good. Sliding her eyes to the next table, she saw Miss Brook, one of the almoners, busily typing from a letter beside her. Probably her own correspondence, Diana thought defiantly, resenting Miss Brook's silence and concentration.

The other girl, Frances, shook her untidy fair curls at her friend.

'All right, if you're not interested.'

'I'm not, particularly.'

'I said, all right.'

Miss May, the junior almoner, coming into the office with a sheaf of papers, felt the tension, and, studiously ignoring it, went to her own table. Understanding people was her job, her chosen job, and it did not only mean the patients, whose welfare it was her professional interest to promote. It meant an attitude of mind and, more important, of heart towards everyone with whom she came in contact. If the girls in the office were, as so often, on the verge of an early morning quarrel, she must be able to resolve it for them, or with them, in showing how unimportant it

had to be compared with the work they would do during the coming hours.

But Peggy May, strenuously applying to herself the principles she had so lately absorbed in her training, was conscious of her own hypocrisy. Her mother's letter seemed to crackle in the pocket of her white uniform coat. She wished she had left it in her handbag in her locker.

'Is Mrs Fulton in her room?' she asked, looking towards Diana, but not saying her name, in case the other girl, Frances, should consider herself overlooked.

Diana kept her head down. It was manners to name the person you were speaking to; Miss May never did show proper manners; so much for her university degree. Brains weren't everything; only gave an unfair advantage.

'I saw her,' Frances said shyly. 'As I came in. She was going towards the Geriatric Ward.'

Her voice held its former note of suppressed excitement, and Diana looked up, hoping to hear the news about Mrs Fulton, if there really were any, without having to betray a personal interest. But Frances did not add to her statement, and Miss May, having said, 'Thank you, Frances,' sat down at her own table to sort her cases.

It was still very early, not yet half-past nine. Outside the almoners' office, in their little bay off the main hall of the Holmwood General Hospital, a few diffident forms were gathering, shepherded to the benches there by one of the two hall porters on duty, who occupied a glass-fronted lodge to the left of the main doors. Directly opposite the doors, across the whole width of the great hall, the main lift gates stood closed: the staircase that wound its way upward round the lift well was empty: only an occasional footstep could be heard on the stone floors of the two long corridors that led from the hall at right angles, one to the quarters of the hospital administrative staff, and beyond that to the rooms of the resident doctors, the other to the out-patient department, which had its separate entrance at the side of this main block of the hospital.

The Holmwood General, since the coming into being of



the National Health Service, had risen in importance, increased in size, and been transformed almost out of recognition. The main doors, the central hall, the staircase, were a century old or more, their grim brick and stone testifying to the unlovely accommodation provided for paupers who were unlucky enough to fall ill. Under the Board of Guardians at the turn of the century, the two corridors had appeared, and the main wings had been built. The destitute, and the emergency for whom a nursing home was impossibly expensive, and for whom a bed could not be found in a voluntary hospital, was given refuge here, and suffered treatment that varied according to the ability of the permanent Medical Superintendent and his staff. Only when the County Council took over the administration of the Poor Law from the Board of Guardians in 1930 were visiting consultants appointed, and special departments instituted, and new blocks of modern, cheerful, even pretty, wards built to cope with the enlarging population of needy sick.

The Second World War spurred on the building effort. Since Holmwood was considered a safe area, though still within a fifty-mile limit of the threatened capital, arrangements were made to take in large numbers of air-raid casualties. A whole new block was built, separate from the main building, and extra staff were taken on.

In the event, hardly any war casualties found their way to this block, but the extra beds were never empty. Holmwood was crammed with evacuees from the autumn of 1940 until the end of the war, and they were often ill, from poor physique, anxiety, or accident. And so, when in 1948 the Health Service acquired the Holmwood General, it turned out to be the largest, most highly organised, and best equipped of the five hospitals of that region, second in treatment to none, though closely rivalled by St Nicholas, a former voluntary hospital, in the neighbouring town of Wittingham.

The almoner's department had been set up when the County Council took over control of the hospital. Patients were no longer objects of charity; if they could afford to pay, they were asked to do so, and it was for the almoner to

assess their ability to meet their bills. In fact a very large part of her time was spent in applying a tactful kind of underground means test, and in arriving, by an arithmetic twisted and torn in the process by secondary considerations, at a figure no one welcomed, the patient considering it too high, and the administration far too low. Since the Health Service began, this exhausting and thankless part of the almoner's work had disappeared into the historic past, though questions of money, and payments for various benefits, remained.

Money was not the principal preoccupation of the head almoner that morning, as she walked back to her office. She crossed the wide concrete road between the new Geriatric block and main building, and went in through Out-patients. Some of the growing crowd there recognised Sally Fulton, and smiled as she passed. Many turned to look at her small energetic figure. She knew she was liked; she had their confidence. Perhaps she was the least feared of all who worked in that place to restore health and ability. For hers was a unique position. She had authority, but no power of life or death like the doctors, and their allies, the nurses. No power to inflict downright suffering in the name of cure, to impose disagreeable disciplines, and even insist that they be continued for life. She smoothed the path to freedom from these things. She helped to bridge the difficult move back from limitless relaxation to crowded responsibility.

Normally she had a smile for everyone she saw. But today, since her whole mind was looking inwards, her preoccupation made her blind, and she recognised no one. Their smiles of greeting faltered and fell away, and Sally disappeared into the corridor, swept resolutely down it, and across the great main hall, and so reached her own office in the bay, entering it by its separate door.

She dropped her notes on her table, leaned forward to smell the jonquils in their vase, and then sat down, tapping her right forefinger on the blotter, as she was in the habit of doing when perplexed.

Old Mr Gurney, she said to herself, forcing her mind back from the echoing cave of fear, where it had run in

terrified circles since her arrival at the hospital that morning. A slip-up over Mr Gurney, and now he was going to be more of a problem than ever. If the surgeons needed a bed why couldn't they put him back in the Geriatric Ward, where he could go at a pinch, instead of discharging him outright?

She rang her bell, and when Diana opened her door, said, 'Good-morning, Diana. Will you see if Mrs Gurney has come up yet? I gave her nine-fifteen, and it's after half-past, so she should be here.'

Probably she had passed her as she came in; one of the drab-coated, patient figures on the benches outside. She had not met her before; the unwilling daughter-in-law, to be persuaded, perhaps, into some kind of grudging co-operation. And now there was this additional complication; it was too bad. Quite suddenly she felt unequal to the coming interview. But when the inner door to the general office opened and Diana stood aside, saying, 'Mrs Gurney, Mrs Fyfe,' she found herself in command of all her usual goodwill, applying it in the technique that practice through the years had perfected.

'Sit down; Mrs Gurney. I hope it wasn't very inconvenient for you to come today, but we do feel you can help us about your father'

'He's not my father,' said Mrs Gurney, seizing the opportunity to drop an impenetrable portcullis in the path of co-operation.

'Father-in-law, of course,' corrected Sally, cursing her slip. 'I asked you to come because he is so much better the doctors say he can go out any day now. In fact I hear this morning that he is being discharged at once. To convalescence,' she added quickly, seeing anger set the lines of young Mrs Gurney's hard-chiselled face. 'To the convalescent home first. But after that he ought not to go back to living by himself.'

This was putting it mildly. The Borough Sanitary department had seen to it that the tiny attic, grey with dust and grease, which had been the old man's lair, was available to him no longer.

'He wasn't living by himself.' Mrs Gurney attacked

fiercely. 'He was with friends; they liked him and put up with him, which is more than what I will, as I told Walter. If ever your dad comes into my home, I told him, I walk out of it. You can take your choice, I said. Filth!' she continued, with a self-righteous glance upwards. 'It made me retch to go into that room. Not in my house, I said to Walter. It's insanitary, I said.'

The argument was sound, and could not be denied. Sally opened her mouth to speak for charity, but was stopped by the rush of Mrs Gurney's words.

'They had the sauce to make Walter go round for his awful old bits of rubbish,' she said. 'After Wilsons had been told they wasn't to let the room no more. Council house, no sub-letting, they told them. Nice kind of Council house, I must say. Requisitioned in the war, and stood empty five years before that, condemned property. But the Council can get you all ways. You'll put that filthy stuff in the shed out the back, I told Walter. It's not coming inside my doors. And no more it did.'

'Mrs Gurney,' said Sally, rousing herself to assert authority. 'I do completely understand your difficulty. But you must try to understand our position, too. The hospital is here to treat sick people, and the waiting lists are enormous. We have a certain number of chronic beds for old people, but this is not a permanent home; and never can be.'

'Then why can't he go to one?'

'Because there are not enough places in the Homes that do exist to take everyone. There are not enough to provide even for the really helpless ones, who have no relatives at all.'

'Mr Gurney's helpless. He don't do a thing for himself. Those Wilsons gave him his meals, I will say that for them.'

'Yes. They seem to have been really kind, even if they were rather grubby in their ways. But Mrs Gurney,' Sally leaned forward in an attempt to impress her visitor. 'He is no relation of theirs. They had no obligation to look after him. Whereas your husband is old Mr Gurney's only son, and——'

'More's the pity,' broke in Mrs Gurney. 'If there'd been others, it wouldn't have been pushed on to us.'

'But don't you think——?' Sally began, desperately keeping her temper. 'Surely you believe that children have some sort of duty to their parents? I know it's more a question of space with you than anything else. Your husband told me you literally have no room in your house to offer him.'

'That's right,' said Mrs Gurney, relaxing a little. 'Right full up, we are.'

'Until your boy goes into the Army in two months' time,' went on Sally, with a wary look.

Mrs Gurney saw the trap too late.

'What's Walter been saying?' she demanded, loudly. 'Wait till I speak to him! What's he said?'

'He agreed with me that his father cannot be allowed to look after himself, or rather, to neglect himself, any longer. He said he would explain the position to you. I hoped he would have done so.'

'He knew better,' said Mrs Gurney, with grim emphasis, but she saw defeat ahead.

'I can do one of two things,' said Sally, briskly, also aware of the end of the battle. 'Mr Gurney is to be discharged today, as I told you. He has made a very good recovery from his operation, you know. As he is going out a few days earlier than we expected, because his bed is needed for an emergency, he is going to the convalescent home at once, in place of someone who prefers to go straight home. They will keep him there about a fortnight. After that either he comes back to Holmwood or I will try to arrange for him to go for what we call a recuperative holiday. He will be boarded with some kind people at Worthing, who do this sort of work for us, and some of the expense will be paid by the County Council. Your husband is willing to put up the rest.'

Mrs Gurney looked sour. But it was clearly not the money side of it she minded, Sally realised; it was the nuisance, the irritation, the disgust, the social reminder, of having in her home an old man displaying the habits of mind and body of a generation brought up in poverty, ill-nourishment, and independence of thought.

'That should tide him over until he comes to you, when you have the room free,' Sally said, firmly, but with inward misgiving.

She hoped the plan would work. But she was painfully aware that its success depended upon the woman before her.

Mrs Gurney said nothing. Ominous, Sally thought, but she had done her best. At the end of the two months old Mr Gurney would be taken by ambulance car from the kind people at Worthing to the Gurney house in Holmwood. By that time the old man would be accustomed to cleanliness again, and might, perhaps, persevere in it. He would be well, and as strong as his age allowed. She prayed that Mrs Gurney would be in a good temper that day. Sometimes the old people found a closed door and an empty house when they arrived; sometimes bitter words, refusing them admittance. Even when all the arrangements had been made and agreed.

She got up, as a signal to Mrs Gurney that the interview was over. She opened the door for her visitor. There were some people you could thank for their co-operation, and some you could look at sadly for their lack of it. Mrs Gurney came into neither class. As far as Sally could tell she had merely retreated to the battlements of the castle, and might at this moment be preparing the boiling oil.

'I know he'll be very grateful,' she said, remembering how the old man's face had looked when she had explained the plan to him.

'He better had,' said Mrs Gurney, darkly.

Sally shut the door behind her and went back to her desk. So much for the Gurney case. A pile of opened letters waited for her consideration and advice; the pick of the day's mail, that she must deal with personally. The Gurney case was finished, for the present, at any rate. The bed question in Hunter Ward was solved.

She picked a letter off the pile and read it, slowly, understanding it with difficulty. The Gurney case and Hunter Ward faded slowly. She read all her letters, then pressed her bell for Diana, and gave dictated replies.

'One more, Diana. I must get a grant for old Mr Gurney. I hope they'll swallow the recuperative holiday after his convalescent fortnight. If the Council won't play, the Samaritan might.'

Diana looked up in astonishment. Mrs Fulton's voice was strange, and she was not really speaking to her, she saw, but looking past her out of the window. And not thinking about old Gurney, either, Diana guessed shrewdly. Saintly Sarah might be feeling queer today, after all; for once Frances might not be romancing.

She dived at her notebook again as Mrs Fulton dropped into dictation. The letter was completed, there was a little pause, and the almonersaid, 'Thank you, Diana. Is Miss May——?'

Sally's unfinished question was answered by Peggy May herself, knocking gently and opening the door at the same time. Diana slipped out, glad to leave an atmosphere whose strangeness disturbed her.

'Yes, Peggy?' Mrs Fulton said, calm and attentive.

Miss May began wildly, 'I've arranged for Mrs Harper. Home Help for the next two weeks at least, Meals on Wheels, and the older children can stay with the grandmother another week. I hoped that would be a fortnight too, but the Health Visitor says Mr Harper is afraid it might affect his mother's health. The old lady has already had to have them a week longer than she expected, because of Mrs Harper's complication with the new baby.'

Mrs Fulton looked at her colleague kindly, and said, 'Do sit down, Peggy.' When the other was seated she turned her head away and went on quietly, 'Mrs Harper and her baby went home yesterday. I knew you'd made all the arrangements: you told me the day before that.'

'Did I?'

Miss May spoke in a desperate kind of whisper, which Mrs Fulton decided to ignore.

'Your cases are your own, Peggy. You need not tell me about them unless you want to. Unless I can help with snags.'

They discussed a few routine matters, then Mrs Fulton asked, 'Is there anyone waiting outside at the moment?'

'No. Miss Brook saw them. I knew you had Mrs Gurney. There was nothing to refer on.'

In the pause that followed both women continued to sit, avoiding one another's eyes. At last, as the junior almoner showed no inclination to move, Mrs Fulton said, 'What did you really come in to tell me, Peggy?'

Miss May thrust her hand into her pocket and pulled out her mother's letter.

'This. My mother wants—— Read it, and you'll see.'

As the letter changed hands Peggy May felt a warm thankfulness pass over her: almost as if her mother stood in person between her and the head almoner. And yet she knew she did not want to do as her mother wished. She knew she would be bored, and often unhappy; that there would be hours of regret, and hours of active rebellion. It was very confusing, but at least the concealment, the double-faced double-dealing, was over.

'Leave your work!' exclaimed Sally Fulton, quite scandalised. 'Give up your job altogether! I simply don't understand.'

'I don't want to,' said Peggy May, miserably. 'I mean, it seems an awful waste after the trouble, and all that, and it was such a solution of what to do, apparently useless degree. I couldn't ever have taught, anyway, not in a girls' school. But somehow, I do have my point——'

'If it isn't impertinent to say so,' Sally began emphatically, 'her point of view is entirely selfish.'

It is impertinent of her, thought Peggy, without resentment. But Mrs Fulton was speaking again.

'She doesn't allow at all for the fact that your work is socially important. No—I don't mean that—is of social importance. It is a definite vocation—for some people——' she added, hoping she did not sound too priggish.

'I'm not sure it was actually a vocation for me,' Peggy said, thoughtfully.

'Was?'

They both smiled, for the first time, and Peggy felt less uncomfortable.



'That slipped out. It sounds as if I had made up my mind, but I haven't—yet.'

'I hope not. Apart from anything else, I should be very sorry to lose you.'

'Thank you.'

'And to think of you sacrificed to an invalid great-aunt, whom your mother is still, presumably, quite capable of managing—'

'She isn't. That's the trouble. While Daddy was alive, she was all right—my mother, I mean. She didn't move an inch without his advice and approval. Afterwards, she didn't move an inch.'

'But you moved. And you ought to keep moving.'

'I don't know.' Peggy looked very dejected again, but suddenly her face cleared and she gave a little laugh. 'It's funny to have you arguing *against* my doing something we are continually trying to make other people do.'

Mrs Fulton's face darkened, but Miss May was not looking at her.

'The number of times we tell them to look after their own aged relatives! And then think up all the arguments against it you are using. It's ~~really~~ rather a scream.'

Mrs Fulton's face ~~darkened~~; it became blank and professional.

'I think we had ~~better~~ got back on the job,' she said, briskly. 'Keep your mother's letter; you will want to answer it, later. It isn't the sort of thing that can be decided in five minutes. It's a question of your whole career—your whole future.'

Peggy May got up without answering. The Sainly One might be right about her whole career, as an almoner; but her whole future was another matter. That, at the moment, was in the hands of Hugh Blake. It might not be there for long. She was growing out of her dreams of inevitable and early bliss. But at present Hugh held the reins that guided her, and she was content with this arrangement. Thinking of Hugh made her mother's demands seem less important and less dangerously exacting.

In a straight fight between Hugh and her mother, he would have a walk-over.

'Your whole future,' Mrs Fulton repeated, hoping she had made some impression.

'Yes, Mrs Fulton,' said Peggy, opening the door just enough to get through, and shutting it noiselessly behind her.

Sally continued to sit at her desk for some minutes, trying to calm herself, while she found excuses for her outburst. She was a person who easily found excuses for the difficult behaviour of others, but, as a rule, condemned herself unheard. Today, however, even her flinty conscience was indulgent. And as she sat, pressing her hands to her forehead, and forcing back the waves of unshed tears, she knew that she was grieving, not for Peggy May's career, not for the loss to the department, not for all the perplexed and ailing souls who passed through her hands in their search for health, but for herself and for her own wasted years.

After a time she sat up, found her handbag, attended to her make-up, and then rang her bell for the next interview. She hoped that someone had arrived with a real difficulty for her to settle. She was right.

The work went on: problems were broken down into their elements; obstacles dissolved away. The alchemy of the department worked, as it nearly always did, to a satisfactory result.

By noon the benches outside the almoners' office were clear. Empty, that is to say, except for two women, who had taken up their station there in the mistaken view that it was the Physiotherapy Unit, for which they had an appointment at one o'clock. Quite reasonably they had assured Miss May that they did not want to see the Lady Almoner. Inquiry had not gone further.

For the staff of a general hospital are accustomed to figures seated in rows on benches. Their curiosity is seldom engaged to know why they are there, how long they have been sitting, whether they will shortly be relieved of their vigil, or left to gossip the day through; whether they are patients, or merely the friends or relatives of patients; whether, in fact,

they are real people at all, or merely stage properties in that most popular drama of modern times, 'Life in Hospital'.

But inside the almoners' department the lunch break arrived in a flurry of activity. Miss Brook left her desk and the room in one swift flowing movement, as if released by sluice gates. Miss May stacked the papers on her desk. From a tiny separate room, off the main office, appeared Miss Gorley, who dealt with the secretarial side of surgical appliances. She was housed in the almoner's department for want of another room. though her work formed no part of theirs, being a straightforward demand and supply unit, working for the orthopædic surgeons who ordered the goods, the appliance manufacturers who fitted and supplied them, and the National Health Service together with the National Assistance Board, who paid for them.

'She's early,' said Frances, when Miss Gorley had passed, smiling faintly, through the office. 'I bet there's liver and bacon on at the canteen today. She's always early when there is, in case of missing it.'

Diana shuddered fastidiously.

'How she can!' she murmured.

'It's good for the blood,' answered the irrepressible Frances. 'She's ever so fussy over her health. They give it in anæmia.'

'You two will be late back, if you're any later going off,' said Miss May, exercising her authority, and then turning away, confused by the commanding tones of her own voice.

'O.K., Miss May. We're just off.'

They glanced at her, to show politeness, and with heads together, hands still clutching papers, began a new interesting topic.

Mrs Fulton's door opened. The girls dropped their papers and dived for their handbags.

'Haven't any of you gone to lunch?' inquired Mrs Fulton, in the gentle voice that made Diana fume and Frances wither. 'Aren't you ready?'

'Oh, yes, Mrs Fulton.' It was quite a chorus.

'Diana.' Sally stopped, then went on again with a slight effort. 'I have to go out now. And I don't think we made

any final definite check-up on old Mr Gurney's ambulance. They should have done it straight from the ward, but as the daughter-in-law came down to see me after she'd spoken to Sister, they may assume we did it. Would you tell Evans on your way to the canteen? It would save me going out that way. Thanks so much.'

She disappeared again into her own office, and they heard her leave by the other door and walk away up the corridor.

Diana and Frances crossed the main hall to the porter's lodge. Evans was pleased to get their message.

'That's the worst of these emergencies,' he said. 'Upsets the skejule.'

'Shame old Mr Gurney being turned out, as you might say,' said Frances. 'And only just over his operation. These surgeons expect you to dance the hornpipe in less than a week after they've had the knife in you.'

'He'll be all right,' said Evans. 'His bed was wanted. There was two emergencies last night, late, and one bed between them. We put that big lad on a camp bed for the night, and he gets Gurney's today. Had to give the emergency bed to the other.'

'Why?'

'Because he's a medico himself. Dr Fulton. Used to be in the X-ray Department here, one time.'

Evans turned away, and took up the receiver of one of the telephones.

'Give me Hunter, ducks,' he said to the girl at the internal exchange.

Frances and Diana were halfway down the corridor that led to the canteen when the former stopped dead with a dramatic gesture.

'Now what is it?' asked Diana, wearily.

'That emergency! Dr Fulton! I bet anything it's her ex-! No wonder!'

'No wonder, what?' said Diana, deliberately dense.

'No wonder Sainly Sarah looked as if she'd seen a ghost. She had, at that!'

## *Chapter II*

SALLY FULTON lived in a two-roomed flat, with kitchenette and bath, in a large new block built after the war on Holmwood's one and only bomb site. It stood back from the High Street, behind shaved grass lawns, guarded by spiked chains, and threaded by narrow concrete paths that led to its three main entrances. Service vans and dust carts had to find their way up the nearest side street to a yard at the back. Private cars passed through the same yard into a circular sweep beyond, with separate lock-up garages all round the edge of it.

Gower Court, as the sixty-four small flats were collectively called, was comfortable and modern, soothed by central heating, all its floors accessible by quiet-running press-button lifts. It was, in every part, communal or separate, totally without character.

Even those who, like Sally, used their own furniture, found that it melted into the repetitive background, the arrangement being conditioned by the exactly similar built-in cupboards, metal-framed windows, ventilators, and electrical fittings; so that all the flats looked very much alike, and it would have been difficult to say which of them were furnished by their tenants and which by the landlord, except that the plain Wilton carpet in the latter was of a slightly superior quality, and invariably of the colour known as beige.

Sally's flat was on the first floor. She liked to use the lift to reach it. But sometimes, after pushing the button several times, and waiting patiently, no light went on behind the gates to show that the lift had arrived, and she had to conclude that some careless person had left it above with the doors open, unable to move. Then she would shrug her shoulders, and move off towards the staircase. Three

short flights to her own landing were not worth troubling about.

After her day of struggle and preoccupation, she left the Holmwood General in a state of consciously controlled tension. She scarcely noticed her journey into the centre of the town: she left the bus automatically at the right stop. The comfortable, discreet, and by no means inexpensive warren of Gower Court towered before her as she got off. She walked up the concrete path she always used. She walked straight through the hall to the stairs, and climbed them to her room. Another inmate, entering after her and pulling open the doors of the waiting lift, paused to stare at her as she mounted.

But once inside her own sitting-room, pulling the window curtains close, clicking on the electric fire, throwing off her jacket, she felt her control crumbling as the flood of her pent-up fear and anger and ancient grief swept in to engulf her. A cold desolation of sorrow rose in her heart, checking the sobs and the warm tears that might have eased her. She had known this deadly, heart-freezing helplessness before. As before there was something about the whole situation that she did not understand; perhaps, by her own fault, could not understand. She had little vanity, and no great belief in her intrinsic worth. What she feared were these sudden, meaningless, recurrent changes of circumstance, unforeseeable as a mountain slide, but as menacing. Such a one threatened her now, and in threatening had, by its very nature, torn away her defences.

She pulled a low chair near to the bright mechanical glow of the fire, holding out trembling fingers towards it, though the spring evening was warm. She was shocked to find her teeth chattering, and took her hands away from the fire to cover her mouth. But the shivering went on.

'It isn't fair,' her frightened brain kept repeating, as it had from the moment she left the hospital that evening. 'Why Holmwood? Of all places! Why Holmwood?'

Tony Fulton, her husband,—no, her ex-, as all her friends called him, appearing, a mere name on an admission

list, after two years of obliteration from her mind, after five years of physical absence. An urgent admission, on the surgical side, a case still on the danger list.

After the moment of panic at the porters' lodge she had found strength to put the news away from her. A misused strength, she realised; perhaps, really, a weakness. Was it a true concentration on her work that she had found, or simply an outlet for her fear? In either case she had effectively doomed her evening to the full horror of unanswered questions, uneasy speculation, and a misery of remembered pain.

Forcing herself away from the orange-red unwinking stare of the fire, she tried to busy herself with the preparation of an evening meal. But when it was done and laid out on a low table, drawn up near the warmth, she found she could scarcely force herself to eat any of it. All the time insistent recurring pictures of Tony came and went before her eyes, more sharply clear than ever before. While behind them moved the imagined figure of lifeless bandaged Tony, flat and straight, neat as a cocoon, lying on an operating theatre trolley or on the dread table itself, unreal, as she fully recognised, unbelievable in the reality of its emotional impact.

Six years ago Sally Thorne had married Tony Fulton. It had been inevitable: everyone had said so at St Nicholas Hospital in Wittingham where they both worked, Sally as one of the almoners, and young Dr Fulton as the junior radiologist.

The affair had developed as all such relationships do, through a common interest and a linked profession. What more attractive sight to a man deeply interested in medicine than a young woman labouring at the human side of the patients' problems? What more worship-inspiring sight to a girl than a young man brilliantly manipulating an intricate means to the diagnosis and treatment of a large number of those patients? Supported by such a background of mutual admiration, any personal gifts of beauty or charm are

magnified quite beyond their real capacity. Add to this the natural wish of young people to experiment with love, and the opportunities in a hospital are endless, the obstacles very easily overcome.

But, once engaged, Tony had begun to be jealous of her work and the jealousy had grown. This was the final conclusion Sally had reached, after months of anguished searching. She had held the view for a long time. But it was not the truth. And now, remembering the first meetings at St Nicholas, her heart found the courage to say no to her mind.

There was the first meeting of all.

'Mrs Palmer didn't keep her appointment, Miss Thorne. Dr Fulton had the notes, I think.'

'I'll ask him.'

Dr Fulton, with whom she had lately exchanged a brief goodmorning, when they met in a corridor. And she could not remember which of them had started that. Probably Dr Fulton; she was too shy to begin that sort of thing.

So far, familiar ground. But her shaken heart insisted now, shocked by his reappearance, that it was most certainly she who had made sure of passing along the X-ray corridor each morning at roughly the time Dr Fulton used it to reach his work. When you see the same person several times in the same place at the same time of day a form of greeting becomes automatic. But the first conversation had been different. She had not manufactured that meeting; it had been a necessary inquiry.

He was in the dark room and he had his back to her, lifting dripping films one by one to look at them in the dim red light, and putting them back one by one in the rack. He did not hear her until she spoke his name, and even then did not turn round.

'Yes, Nurse?'

'Miss Baines would like to know if you could authorise a hospital car to bring Mrs Palmer up for her X-ray? It was done the last time she came, six months ago.'

'Why doesn't the Almoner——' he was beginning, but he



had glanced round, and noticed, perhaps, that she wore no cap, for he put down the film he held and came towards her, peering at her in the darkness where she stood.

'Sorry. I thought you were a nurse. You are one of the almoners, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Mrs Palmer? Let me see. Oh, I know. Mrs Palmer. Youngish woman, T.B. spine. Wears a brace now, after a very long spell in plaster. Came to live in Wittingham three years ago when she married. Referred to orthopædics here by her own local doctor when she went on his list. Why doesn't he order the car?'

'She says she never goes to him now, because she's so well.'

'Then why can't she come up under her own steam?'

'She lives outside the town, on a country bus route. It means a change of buses and nearly an hour's wait if she misses the connection. She says there isn't a shelter where she changes buses, and it makes her back ache to stand for long.'

'A bit phoney, but I suppose she's got the habit of being looked after all along the line.'

She had looked at him admiringly.

'They do, don't they? They can't help it, when they've been under treatment a long time.'

He had smiled at her, an acknowledgement of her quick understanding, an acceptance of her unspoken praise. He had written her the necessary chit, and she had gone back to the almoners' office with it, hiding her triumph, which she recognised as such, under a light veil of cynicism.

She did not hesitate to discuss Dr Fulton with her friends. 'Your smashing radiologist,' they all called him, and demanded constant news of her progress. Of real progress she was, at first, completely sceptical, and so was quite willing to amuse them in the way they wanted.

But after Tony had begun to ask her out, and later, when she found how deeply she had fallen in love with him, she avoided the questions, or invented false answers. 'The Dr

Fulton they, and she, derided, as the film star of the X-ray room, had nothing to do with her Tony, the ideal lover of her long-protracted adolescence.

Sally Fulton forced herself to eat her nearly cold boiled egg, shuddering, as she turned them over with a dry tongue, at the slippery flaps of cold albumen, and the roughness of cold toast. She summoned all her reserves of pride and later habit to put away the youthful reincarnation of her successful love, which had drawn her on through easy victory to the total defeat of her marriage.

Tony had left her after one year. An ecstatic honeymoon had been followed by a slow decline of joy, of pleasure, of confidence, of security, of self-respect. Total happiness was succeeded by total bewilderment. And as the clinging weeds of her misery fastened upon her understanding, it sank in their grasp and stopped struggling, drowned by her grief. She began to blame where before she had questioned. She hated the nagging tones of her own accusing voice, but she could not prevent or control it. Alternately she abased herself in private, and sought to abuse him before her. She longed to go back to work, to find some focus of sanity outside her own harassed being. But she did nothing about it. She stayed at home, trying to think of some way to please Tony again, to dissolve the dreadful mask of his indifference, which she saw only too plainly was growing into dislike. She stayed at home, waiting for the pregnancy which would make everything right again between them, but which never came.

There was an answer to the remembered anguish of this bitter defeat. Again and again Sally had given it to herself and to her friends.

'A blessing there were no complications.'

'How do you mean?'

'Children.'

'Oh. I thought you meant another woman.'

'Of course there was another woman.'

That stood at the centre of her predicament. It was the heart of the mystery, just as the mystery was the poisonous gall that never ceased to drip into her wound, keeping it open and festering.

Nine months after their marriage Tony had been transferred from the X-ray department at St Nicholas to that of the neighbouring town of Holmwood. This meant that he had to leave home earlier in the morning and return there later each evening. Sally, in her mood of mingled distrust and self-condemnation, resented the change. But there was nothing extraordinary about it. The position he had moved to was a step forward in his career. Holmwood was a larger hospital, with a better equipped, more modern department than at St Nicholas. When she understood this she tried to take back her ill-considered criticism, but so clumsily that they were both embarrassed. On this occasion, as on many at that time, no reconciliation was possible. The difference wore itself out by neglect, but neither of them forgot it.

And in the new circumstances Sally found herself with less and less to do. Tony got up early to make his own breakfast. He preferred it that way, and as she so often did not sleep until the early hours of the morning, she was thankful to wake and find him gone. Sometimes he came home at seven for his dinner: more often he telephoned in the late afternoon to say he still had work to do and would get his meal with the resident staff. She stopped planning a dinner to please him, since he was so seldom there to enjoy it. And she had no heart to cook for herself alone. Often she went without a proper meal all day, walking about the town of Wittingham looking vacantly into shop windows, and when she was exhausted, finding a seat in some cheap tea-shop where a cup of coffee gave her the right to rest her aching feet, though it could not ease the pain in her heart.

But she was always home again in the late afternoon waiting for the telephone call that would drive her out again to wander until nightfall, or rarely, in a feverish activity, to set about cooking a dinner. Even so, he might be as much as an hour later than she expected, and the meal

would be spoiled. He never complained; only his silence, or polite aloof conversation, showed her that he was sorry he had not, once again, avoided his home.

Sally Fulton pushed away the tray and the remains of her meagre supper. So it had been then: so it was now. Dying embers. Only, she thought, with self-mocking bitter laughter, her electric fire had no death in it, with its polished reflector, as bright as a neon sign and as constant.

But the dying embers had been real then. As their glow faded, and the ash crumbled, and the chill of the room crept forward to the hearth, until the circle of cold stood iron-fast about her, the image of that dead fire was burned into her heart and memory, ineradicable, symbol of an injury that could never be undone.

On that day there had been no telephone call in the late afternoon. She had set about her cooking at six. At eight she had tried to eat some of the ruined meal. At nine she had cleared it all away. At twelve, when the fire was getting low, she told herself, crouched on the hearthrug, that accidents hardly ever happen to one's own people, and that anyway, if something had gone wrong on his way home, six hours ago, she would have been told of it by now. An hour later she sat up stiffly, and twisting a fold of her skirt with the chilled fingers of one hand, she said aloud, 'He has left me.'

She said it over and over, with the shock of the words growing less and less at each repetition, until the meaning had gone and only the silly, short, plain little words remained. 'He has left me. He has left me. He has right me. He has left me. Right me. Left me.'

She was giggling foolishly as she got up, rubbing her cold hands together, and went out into the hall of their little suburban house. She moved slowly towards the stairs, but she had to pass the hooks on the wall where her mackintosh, and his, and his overcoat, and the old duffle he wore at week-ends, had their place. She noticed for the first time

that day that both the mackintosh and the overcoat had gone. So there could not have been an accident. It must have been planned. And she could have known much sooner if she had not been wrapped away in her constant unhappiness.

When she realised all this, her self-pity flooded in to cover the unbearable knowledge of failure and bereavement, and she wept, burying her face in the old duffle coat. She took it to bed with her that night. She gorged herself until morning with sentimental reminiscence. She sealed up the path to any deeper knowledge of herself or of Tony, or of the tragedy of their broken relationship.

In the morning there was a letter from him. In it he did not blame himself or her. He simply said that he was sure she would agree with him that they had both made an unfortunate mistake, and the consequences would only get worse if nothing was done. He therefore proposed to live in Holmwood until his appointment to the senior post at a Leeds hospital, for which he had already applied, was confirmed. He would, naturally, make her an allowance, which he would pay into her account.

'But I shan't accept it a day longer than I have to,' she told her mother, who arrived in answer to her telegram, that same afternoon. 'I shall go back to almoning.'

'Of course there's another woman behind all this,' said her mother.

'I suppose so.'

'There must be. Didn't you know he was like that?'

'No.'

It was a lie, but a necessary one. To have known before marriage would, in her mother's eyes, have implied a suicidal step in continuing the engagement. It was bad enough to have been so ignorant up to the last minute,—no, beyond it. In Mrs Thorne's view her daughter had, unforgivably, lost a tactical advantage.

'You will get a divorce, of course.'

'I don't think I can.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know who it is.'

Another lie, quite indefensible in her mother's eyes, and certainly not to be believed.

'There are ways of finding out. You must leave it to Mr Hebden.'

'No. I think I shall just leave it.'

And in spite of all Mrs Thorne's parade of worldly wisdom, and all her own indignant wish to teach Tony a lesson, always with the reservation at the back of her mind that he would profit by it to the point of returning to her, she did just leave it. Her innate delicacy of feeling, her natural objection to publicity, and, above all, the guilt that lay half-hidden in her mind, exposing its slimy surface every time the tide of emotion ebbed, all this held her back. Mr Hebden, the family solicitor, was kind and friendly, but she knew it would be impossible to sit in the leather-covered chair, facing him across a desk covered with books and papers and telephones, and describe to him the sad secrets of her life with Tony. Even her mother knew nothing of their long, slow-growing estrangement.

So it was that Sally, conscious of deceit, aware of hypocrisy, kept silence, while her family and friends built her into a much-wronged, long-suffering wife, too gentle and forgiving to take her just revenge.

About that time, Holmwood Hospital, reorganising and expanding with the development of the National Health Service, decided to enlarge the almoner's department. Sally applied for the vacant post, and since Tony Fulton had now gone to Leeds, and there had been no open scandal, she was appointed. Her history was known, in her mother's version, to most of the staff at Holmwood, and so they were all able to avoid mentioning it; though a little ostentatiously at first, which made everyone uncomfortable. Later, Sally grew exasperated by the sudden pauses and the quick change of wording, and the way her colleagues never spoke of St Nicholas Hospital, or indeed of Wittingham itself.

She had given up her house there soon after getting the Holmwood job, and had found her small flat in the middle of the latter town. After six months the memory of her early married home no longer sent a sharp physical pain through her chest, and she wanted to talk of it whenever houses were discussed. It seemed to her slightly ridiculous to treat her married life, however short, as a blank period of her existence, rather as if she had lost her memory for that time, or had spent it in prison or a mental hospital, or in some other unmentionable way. So she withdrew the ban from her own conversation and, after a few shocked passages, managed to persuade everyone of her full recovery. It was at this time that the younger generation, tired of being told how wonderfully she had behaved, began to call her Saintly Sarah to one another. The nickname pleased the unregenerate of all ages at Holmwood Hospital. When it came to Sally's own ears she accepted it with an ironical smile. She was nothing if not honest on the subject of her own shortcomings.

How very long ago this period seemed to her now. Then she was only an extra almoner, rather resented by the existing staff, who thought her redundant. Now she was the head of the department, with two other almoners and two secretaries. She had often wondered whether she would have been promoted at Holmwood if her divorce had gone through before, instead of after, that event. She thought of it again now, and the old mystery of the delayed divorce brought her to her feet and set her pacing the short length of her sitting-room, aimlessly moving her ornaments, taking up books or photographs and putting them down again.

Punctually, Tony had written to her after three years to ask her if she would consent to divorce him on the ground of desertion. She had written back by return of post, asking for his real reason. She explained that the truth was due to her after her long forbearance.

His answer astonished her. Three years, he wrote, was the

minimum time. She was entitled to a divorce now, and he imagined she might prefer it. The truth was that they were not suited to one another as marriage partners: they had not made a go of it, and now that the law could release them from an unsatisfactory contract why not take advantage of it? He wished her every happiness in the future.

This time her mother's explosion of wrath did not revolt her. She took her two letters to Mr Hebden in a fury of resentment. But his advice was chilling. After three years of apparent condoning, she could hardly cite an old attachment of Tony's. Did she know if the woman in question had been living with him for these three years? It was not improbable. Did she know of anyone else, who might be living with him now? Naturally it was very unlikely that he had not committed adultery many times over since he left her, but inquiries would have to start on a recent basis, and even then the situation would be complicated by her inexplicable delay. Why not do as Dr Fulton suggested? Desertion was much more respectable than adultery, even in these days. And there was his career to think of: did she really want a petty revenge?

'No. Certainly not. But he writes so casually—as if I was to arrange to buy a house, or an annuity.'

'Hasn't he always taken a rather casual view of marriage?'

'I suppose so.'

But it wasn't true. Tony, when she had first known him, had been deadly serious about marriage. That was the chief reason why, in the end, after all their hesitations and differences, she had married him. Nevertheless, Mr Hebden was quite right, in one sense, at least. Tony had been very open and matter-of-fact about marriage. Unlike herself, he had treated it always as a bargain between two individuals for their mutual comfort, companionship, and pleasure, not at all, as she did, as a sacrament, a union that could, that should, have a mystical significance. But he had not been casual in his erotic relationships. Simply, she had considered him a materialist, while he had called her a



romantic schoolgirl. It did not occur to her to explain all this to Mr Hebden.

So the divorce went through, and at intervals during the following months, on the days when the papers mentioned it, in a list of other routine separations, her friends and colleagues wore their old veils of tact, and spoke to her in voices respectfully lowered for the interment of her marriage.

Again Saintly Sarah went about her work, helping the recently sick to climb back into their ordinary lives, and wearing her usual patient smile without its accustomed cheerfulness. She knew what they were all saying, her kind friends and colleagues, and how untrue was their opinion of her. Every night she cried for the final destruction of her fantasy. Only she called it her 'life', as, of course, it had by then become.

She cried now, after these years of supposed healing, because the hard scab had been torn off with sickening violence, and a fresh unaccustomed pain had taken full possession of her. She cried, sitting on her hearthrug, with her head between her arms, resting on the seat of her comfortable chair. She wept to find herself so vulnerable, and in great confusion, because she did not understand why Tony, who lived and worked in Leeds, had suddenly appeared at the Holmwood General Hospital.

And she wept for fear on his behalf, because he had been admitted during the night as a surgical emergency, and had remained on the danger list all that day.

### *Chapter III.*

ON the following morning Peggy May was ten minutes late in arriving at the Holmwood General. She flew in past the porters' lodge, with no time to waste in looking at admission or discharge lists, much as she would have liked to do so. It was more important to get out of her coat and into her uniform. But a voice from the lodge checked her.

'Miss May! Miss May, please!'

Peggy halted, turning her head towards the voice. 'The chief porter, who had come out of the lodge, held a letter towards her.

'For the department?'

'For Mrs Fulton, miss.'

'Oh. Why didn't you give it to her when she came in? She has come in, I expect?'

It was a question rather than a statement, and the head porter answered it.

'Yes, miss, she's in. But the note came down later.'

'Oh, I see. From the wards?' She glanced at it, and recognised the firm large hand of Sister in Hunter Ward. She looked up at the porter, aware that the eager interest in his eyes was reflected in her own. A faint disgust took hold of her.

'Thank you,' she said, beginning to move on again. 'I'll give it to Mrs Fulton.'

Of course the letter would be about her colleague's ex-, and it must be bad news if Sister Collett had sent a note rather than a verbal message by a nurse. So she did not relish her mission: it was bad enough to feel bound in a conspiracy of curiosity, vulgar, gutter-press gossip curiosity, with the hospital porter. It would be worse to have to watch Mrs Fulton taking the letter, guessing at its contents, afraid to open it.

However, she was spared this embarrassment. When she went into the general office of the almoners' department, she found Miss Brook in the act of getting up from her desk to go into Mrs Fulton's room.

'Missed your bus?' asked Miss Brook, giving her junior colleague a severe look.

'Yes.'

Miss Brook knew that the buses into Holmwood from the village of Shelton ran every half-hour. They were not conveniently timed for reaching the General at nine. So either Miss May was fifteen minutes early or fifteen minutes late in reaching the office. It was most unsatisfactory; much better if the girl found digs in Holmwood itself, like the rest of them. Staying with family friends was very pleasant for her, no doubt, but not businesslike, if it meant such fluctuations in the routine.

'You'll have to come into Holmwood to live, don't you think?'

'It may not——' Peggy May was going to say that it might not be worth it, but she did not want to discuss her future with Miss Brook, so she halted, holding out the letter the porter had given her.

'You were just going in to Mrs Fulton, weren't you? Would you mind giving her this? Evans handed it to me as I passed the lodge.'

Miss Brook took it, stared at it, looked up again at Peggy, with the same eagerness, the same half-stifled curiosity the latter had met at the lodge. As the older woman opened Mrs Fulton's door to go in, Peggy May saw that the two girls at their tables had stopped typing and were staring after Miss Brook.

'Diana,' Peggy said sharply. 'Will you see if Mrs Pendleton is outside?'

'Yes, Miss May.'

Mrs Pendleton was outside. At this time hardly a week passed at the Holmwood General without Mrs Pendleton being found at one or other of the many out-patient departments of the hospital, and each visit to a department

was usually followed by a corresponding session in the almoners' office.

Mrs Pendleton was a case. For close on twelve years she had lived obscurely in a back street of Holmwood, with her husband, a lorry driver, and her regularly increasing family, which had now reached a total of seven. Breeding suited her, for she was indolent by nature, and adored babies. The cares of a household, the work of a home, cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, mending, suited her not at all. The older children, used in turn to neglect, as the cot was replenished, looked after one another, until education claimed them, one by one. After that a state of warfare existed between the Education Authority and the Pendletons. Whenever the harrassed mother felt that her duties were too much for her, and this was very often, she would keep a child, preferably the eldest girl, at home from school, to run her errands, do her shopping, and take those under school age for a walk, leaving her free to sit in her window in the sun, enjoying the prattle of the baby.

The Authority demanded a valid reason for the scholar's absence. Mrs Pendleton sent the willing truant to their doctor's surgery with Mr Pendleton in the evening, to get a certificate for absence on health grounds. When the doctor, alive to this gambit, encouraged the father to send his girl to school, Mrs Pendleton insisted upon a change of doctor to one who was too busy or too lenient to withhold the vital slip of paper.

In this way, in an atmosphere of increasing dirt, shabbiness, and disorder, the Pendletons grew up, a remarkably healthy brood; for their stomachs were always filled, however unsuitably, and their constitutions were excellent. Plenty of company at home kept them cheerful and happy.

But Mr Pendleton was not happy. When he married Mrs Pendleton she had been pretty, in a full-bosomed, blowsy style, that had appealed to his early taste. She was not pretty any longer. She had been living, while he was still in the Army, with her own family; and later, when they had a house of their own, he forgave her inexperience on this

account. She had had plenty of time to learn since then, but she had not learned. Worse, he saw that she did not intend to learn. He wanted a neat, smart, bright home, like those of his friends, filled with the post-war goods his increased wages could have provided, if he hadn't had to be always getting shoes and clothes for the kids. It is very likely that Mr Pendleton would have deserted his amiable, fertile, exasperating wife, had he not, in a fit of brooding on his dissatisfactions, driven his lorry over a bridge into a river, and drowned himself.

And now, from being an obscure slattern, looked at with mingled pity and contempt by her neighbours, and known publicly only to the school authorities, Mrs Pendleton became, from the day of her registration with the National Assistance Board, a charge upon nearly every source of succour and advice in the borough of Holmwood. The chief of these being the Holmwood General Hospital.

'It's about Joyce's spectacles, Mrs Pendleton,' said Peggy May. 'The Children's Officer tells us the school have complained to you seven times that Joyce can't see the black-board even from the front row, and you know you told me she was wearing the spectacles the doctor here ordered for her.'

'So she was,' said Mrs Pendleton.

'But she isn't wearing them now?'

'I never said she wasn't.'

'The Children's Officer says she has seen Joyce in the street several times without them.'

'She's a young madam, that Joycie. I makes 'er wear them at 'ome. She don't fancy 'erself in them.'

'Are the other girls at school teasing her about them?'

'They might. She wouldn't care for that, so much. It's 'er looks she's vain of.'

'But can't you explain to her how bad it is for her eyes to go without? They may get worse. And education is so important, too. I mean, she won't get a decent job anywhere without it.'

Mrs Pendleton smiled complacently, shifting the little boy on her lap from one knee to the other.

'I was never much of a scholar, miss, myself,' she said.

This brought the conversation to an abrupt end. But Miss May courageously revived it.

'The eye specialist is particularly anxious to know if Joyce has still got her spectacles. He asked us to follow up. Can I tell him that you make her wear them at home?'

'Oh, yes. I certainly do. She can't see the Tele without them.'

'But she takes them off and hides them at school?'

'Is that what she does?'

'That's what she tells her teachers she does.'

'The young limb!'

'She hasn't lost them, has she? Or broken them, or anything?'

'Not to my knowledge, miss.'

'I see. Well, do your best, won't you? I hope you didn't mind coming in to see us? Dr Foster is very worried about Joyce's eyes. You realise if she doesn't wear those glasses, there is a danger of blindness?'

'That's what the doctor said. Joyce 'eard 'im, too. You might as well tell a brick wall——'

'You've got an appointment this afternoon for the young man's fits, haven't you?'

Mrs Pendleton fondled the vacant-looking, but robust child on her knee.

'Yes. You wouldn't credit it to look at 'im, would you?'

'No. He looks very well.'

Miss May prayed that the infant would not demonstrate the fallacy of this on the spot in her presence: she moved her chair a little further from her table.

But the youngest Pendleton did nothing to alarm her, except close his eyes and lean back against his mother, with a gradually paling face, and breathing that grew light and regular.

'Dropped right off, bless 'im,' said Mrs Pendleton, lovingly. 'He'll 'owl the place down when the doctor wakes

'im up. Always does. But never 'ad a fit in this hospital yet. So they can't rightly make up their minds.'

Later in the morning, Peggy May was called into Mrs Fulton's office. At the end of her conference she mentioned Joyce Pendleton's spectacles.

'Mrs P. says Joyce won't wear them at school.'

'Joyce now says her mother broke them by treading on them when they were on the floor. According to the Welfare Officer.'

'I hadn't heard that one. They were on the floor instead of on Joyce's nose?'

'Exactly.'

'That sounds much more likely than the tale I got. Can anything be done?'

'Not by us. Our job was to find out why she attends Dr Foster's out-patients without the glasses, and how much she is wearing them. The answer is nil all round. The Children's Officer must have another go now, through the Welfare Officer from the Assistance Board, or in some other way. Or the N.S.P.C.C. might take a hand. Or the Borough Health Visitors when they look in to see how the baby is.'

'That's the one with fits?'

Mrs Fulton shook her head.

'Said to have fits. Not proved, either way. Meanwhile Mrs P. will continue to take her recreation in our Out-patients, and her home will be more of a pig-sty than ever.'

Miss May went back to the main office. As she passed the typists Frances looked up.

'Is she all right this morning?'

'Mrs Fulton?'

Frances nodded.

'Yes. Why shouldn't she be?'

Diana looked across at Frances, frowning heavily. The latter was intimidated.

'Oh, nothing. I only wondered.'

Peggy May sat down at her own table. She was

determined not to gossip with the girls, but she understood their interest. Few people on the staff of the hospital could be ignorant by now of the dramatic re-entry of the Almoner's past. Miss May was very conscious of her own curiosity. When she had been in Mrs Fulton's room she had looked at the former's desk for evidence of the letter the porter had given her: it had not been there.

If she had looked below the desk, however, she would have seen it, stuffed into the top of the wastepaper basket, and torn into a mass of small fragments. For Sally, in opening the letter, had received something of a shock.

She had sat, when Miss Brook left her, with the sealed letter propped up against a calendar on her desk, staring at it, and wondering what she would find inside. His name was still on the danger list when she reached the hospital that morning, but that need not mean very much. In any case it was the list of the evening before: a more up-to-date bulletin had not arrived.

But here was a note from Sister Collett. To prepare her? To warn her? To explain the case, knowing she would not be able to bring herself to ask?

And then at last Sally had opened the envelope and experienced the shock, in a form she had not imagined.

For the note inside was in Tony's familiar spiky handwriting, the sight of which set her trembling, while tears gathered in her eyes. She stared down at the folded paper, too unnerved to spread it out and read the contents, seeing it dimly through her welling tears and the surge of her memories, which crowded into her mind, driving out the present.

After a time she forced herself to read. And now she received still another shock, less severe, this time braced with anger. For she found no death-bed remorse, no last-minute repentance, no wish for reconciliation: merely, he wrote, a friendly wish to see her again, if she felt the same way about him.

She tore the note across and across, covering her desk with a shower of small pieces. Then swept it all into the



waste-paper basket, pressing it down with a furious hand.

All the morning, and the early part of the afternoon, she worked with energy and false bright cheerfulness. Diana and Frances, noting at the lunch break that Dr Fulton was off the danger list now, agreed that this was the cause of it.

'She's as different again,' said Frances. 'Poor old Saintly Sarah. Faithful unto death.' She giggled, sliding her eyes round to Diana.

'I wouldn't exactly say that,' answered the other girl. She had her own speculations about Mrs Fulton's emotional life, but no intention of sharing them with Frances, at least until she saw how the present crisis developed. In their different ways the two girls were finding much satisfaction in the development of this drama; it accorded well with their private opinions of hospital life.

Sally Fulton, meanwhile, was gradually recovering from her sense of outrage. She, also, had seen that Tony's name was off the danger list. She had, too, looked up his case in the operations book on its desk outside the operating theatres, and she knew that her former husband's catastrophe was a perforated gastric ulcer. His recovery therefore, would take time, both in hospital and after he left it. However badly he had treated her once, however casual, even flippant, his present attitude, he remained a seriously ill man, and all her professional instinct and training were on his side.

In the late hours of that afternoon Sister in Hunter Ward was sitting in her own room drinking a well-earned cup of tea, when Mrs Fulton, after knocking, came in. The Almoner was still wearing her uniform, though her day's work was done.

Neither of the women spoke for a moment, both very conscious of Sally's errand.

'I got the note you sent down,' said Sally, at last. 'If he really wants to see me, I don't mind.'

Sister Collett pushed her cup away and stood up.

'I don't in the least understand how he got here,' Sally added.

'Bed service,' answered Sister. 'He was staying with friends in Wittingham, some doctor there called Mallinson. They tried to get him into St Nicholas, but there wasn't a bed, and the bed service made us take him here. Though we hadn't really got an emergency bed free, either. Another case had just come in.'

'It must have been very bad for him to have to come all this way, from the Mallinsons.'

She was thinking how strange it was of the Mallinsons to have him to stay. And she began to wonder how many of their other friends and acquaintances in Wittingham had kept up with him, far away in Leeds. She had somehow imagined that their sympathies, so often expressed at first, had been solely for her. But perhaps they had been equally solicitous for Tony. Or more so. She had seen less and less of them all herself, since she came to live in Holmwood.

She was thinking of this as she followed Sister Collett into the ward, until the former stopped beside a bed whose cubicle curtains were all drawn. With her trained knowledge of sick people's next of kin, Sister immediately understood the sudden tension of fear in Sally's face. She said, soothingly, 'He has to be kept very quiet, of course. He is still on a drip. And this time of day the walking cases are up and about and making a fuss of the bed cases, unless their curtains are drawn.'

Knowing all this, Sally was still afraid.

'Is he very—is he——?' She could not find words for what she wanted to ask.

'He's very thin,' said Sister. 'It must have been blowing up for a long time. But his colour is coming back nicely today. He's going to do very well.'

She pulled back the curtain at the foot of the bed and motioned Sally to go inside.

'What are you nattering about, Sister?' said a weak voice from the bed.

'I said you were going to do very well.'

'Of course I'm going to do well. Hullo, Sally. Nice to see you.'

She felt the tears running down her cheeks, but she neither apologised for them, nor tried to wipe them away. Tony pointed with his free hand to a chair at his bedside and she took it. Sister went away, pulling close the cubicle curtains as she did so.

'You look fine,' said Tony cheerfully, in his faint voice. 'Fatter in the face, too. It suits you.'

'Fatter altogether.' The tears had ceased to flow. 'I have to diet from time to time.'

'Shame.'

His eyes ran over her figure, concealed in the hospital uniform. Sally got out her handkerchief to dry her eyes, and also to give herself an excuse for silence. She was horrified by the violence of her immediate tears, because her mind remained cool, moving within its professional orbit. She was not upset by Tony, the patient: she had a long and intimate experience of the post-operative state. He was still pale and drawn, and his eyes seemed to have sunk a long way into his head. He was propped on pillows, with one arm on a back splint. A glass cannula, in a vein of the arm, connected with a length of rubber tubing, that led to an inverted bottle of fluid over his bed. But she knew that another twenty-four hours, if all went well, would remove these aids to combating shock and hæmorrhage. It was no longer necessary to be anxious for his life, and she was not anxious. Her sudden outburst, she knew, was simply the accumulated desolation of the years, released in full flood by the sound of his voice speaking in terms of friendship.

She felt a strange peace pervading her heart. She realised, drying her eyes, and daring to look at him again, that the past, which had swelled to a distorted balloon of anger and hatred, was not only punctured, but quite destroyed. She was now freed of the fantasy of his essential evil, his deliberate wickedness and cruelty. It was ludicrous to imagine this frail person a monster.

'They don't want me to talk much yet,' said Tony,

looking at her with the same steady, curious gaze. 'You'll have to make the conversation. Tell me about yourself.'

She found it quite natural to describe her present life, especially the hospital part of it. Even the rest gave her no real uneasiness. It seemed as if the tears she had shed on seeing him had washed away not only the anger and grief, but the previous romantic love; not only the villain of the piece, but the original fairy prince. And she was doubly relieved by the twin loss. She had now before her an old and familiar friend to whom she did not have to explain too much.

'I wish you were allowed to talk,' she said, when she could think of nothing more to tell him. 'I'm just as curious, if not more so.'

He laughed, and grimaced with pain as the laughter pulled his wound and hurt him.

'I'm sorry. You can't even laugh yet.'

'Yesterday I couldn't even swallow. I had a tube down my throat. I was on suction.'

'How beastly!'

'Worse to look at in others.'

'I know.'

She had not often seen patients in those very early stages after operation, when they seemed to be nothing but semi-conscious automata worked by machines; she hurried by when she caught glimpses through cubicle curtains of still figures surrounded by complicated apparatus. She looked at Tony now, imagining what had so recently happened to him, and smiled and shivered.

He smiled back at her. The interview had gone far better than he had feared it might. He was glad he had risked it, though he had known all along that he had an unfair advantage. Still, she need not have responded. Except that he knew, better than most, the essential goodness of heart and dedication that would make her respond. Just as it had made her impossible to live with. All the same, the fact that she had come did suggest that she had grown up a bit. As he hoped he had, himself.

Sally rose to go. She wanted to show Sister Collett that

she knew the routines of ward behaviour; she was not going to be told to leave. And there was no pang in the thought of doing so, since jealousy dies with love, and the illusion that had been her love was now quite dead.

'I'm going before Sister throws me out,' she said, touching his limp hand. 'But I'll look in again, when I've time.'

'Busy?'

'Always busy. People expect more and more to be looked after, and have everything done for them.'

'And you are still ready and willing to oblige?'

'It's my job.'

They exchanged another smile. Then Tony said, 'Yes, I think it is. It always was.'

If she stiffened a little, he did not show any sign of noticing it, but he changed the subject. He looked at his watch, lying on the locker top beside him, and went on in the same tone, 'My wife ought to be here by now. You must meet her.'

Instantly Sally's new-found calm vanished. She felt her cheeks redden and the tears come back to her eyes; so she turned away, moving clumsily towards the opening in the curtains of the cubicle.

'What's the matter?'

Tony was concerned.

'I don't think—she'd want to meet me.'

'Why not?'

'Then I don't think—I want to meet her—again.'

Tony stared, and Sally stared back. The shadow of their old hostility dropped, like an icy cloud, between them.

'Again?' Tony asked, in his tired voice. 'Why again?'

Sally went back to the bedside.

'Hazel and I have never met since the day she left St Nicholas, before you and I——'

She could not say the words 'were married'. But Tony was not listening to the end of her sentence.

'Hazel!' he said, utterly puzzled. 'Who the heck is Hazel? I'm married to a girl called Madeleine, and I'll bet you anything you like you've never seen her.'

## *Chapter IV*

**A**s Dr Fulton's condition improved, the number of his daily visitors grew. Sally found it difficult even to book an interview for the next day.

Sister Collett, to whom she spoke each time she rang up the ward, had bitter words to say on the subject.

'I don't mind his wife sitting with him. She's a harmless little thing, not quite sure of herself in a big hospital like this. But he ought to tell his friends to leave him alone for a bit; or she ought to. They're all doctors, of course, which makes it very awkward for me.'

Mrs Fulton sympathised, but found her own difficulty unrelieved. In spite of what Tony had said, she did not want to meet her successor. She was curious, but she shrank from actually meeting the new wife. For years she had seen Hazel Creighton in the role, and had suffered on that account. She had first to adjust herself to the fact that he had not ever taken Hazel seriously. Of course he had sworn to her at the time that there was nothing in it. Now she must believe this. Well, she could make herself accept anything. And since there was no chance now of becoming jealous, it might be a good thing, after all, to meet this wife of his; this Madeleine.

But still she found excuses for putting it off, the chief of these being Sister's complaints, and the prior claims of his doctor friends. In the meantime she had plenty of work to occupy her.

The days were lengthening. When the sun shone there was real warmth in its rays. And one morning, after admiring the blue spring sky through the overhanging branches of trees near the hospital gate, Sally noticed that blossom had appeared overnight on the prunus overhanging the wall.

'Let's take our coffee into the sun,' she said to Miss Brook, after lunch that day.

'Tea for me,' her colleague answered. 'I'll fetch my coat.'

Miss Brook, who felt the cold, appeared again muffled to the neck, and sat down on a low stone wall beside Sally, who had rolled up her sleeves and spread herself on the stone flags below it.

'Isn't this marvellous?' said Sally, sleepily.

'While it lasts. Pity we don't ever get more than a day at a time.'

'Oh, we do. Quite often. This is just the thing for convalescents. I wonder how old Mr Gurney is enjoying it.'

Miss Brook did not answer. She had been upset that morning, and had had no time to speak to Mrs Fulton before lunch. But she could not make trifling conversation with this worry on her mind. She felt she must unload it, or it would spoil her work for that day. But she did not want to be too abrupt; or too censorious.

'There's a girl called Molly Mahon,' she began, heavily. 'One of the cleaners.'

Sally, who had her eyes shut, basking in the sun, made a low contented noise.

'Would you rather I waited till we start work?' asked Miss Brook, anxiously.

Sally would much rather have enjoyed the spring sunshine unmixed with 'shop'. But she did not want to offend her hard-working, if unimaginative colleague, so she opened one eye in her direction.

'No. Carry on if you want to.'

'This Mahon girl came from an Irish domestic agency. Not the one we've had dealings with before. At least the name's different.'

'A just distinction, and probably meaningless. The girl is expecting, I suppose?'

'Yes. Who told you?'

'No one. Or rather, you, in that hushed voice. That's the third this year.'

Sally Fulton sat up slowly. She finished the dregs of her

cold coffee, looked at her watch, and lifted herself to her feet, to sit on the wall beside Miss Brook.

'Since she came over from Ireland, or before?'

'Before. She's only been here two months, but she's a good three months on the way.'

'It's a racket,' said Sally, with disgust in her voice.

'These Irish girls?'

'Yes. Too easy. Recommended for domestic work in English hospitals, which can't get native labour. Too badly needed, you see, for anyone over here to be choosy. Besides, you can't voice that sort of suspicion, even if you have it. And the agencies are right in the clear, too. How can *they* suspect a girl in the second month, either? The culprits wait a couple of months or more, then they see a doctor, to have it confirmed. Then they see the hospital staff supervisor, all very hush-hush.'

'Then we get roped in,' said Miss Brook, with all a confirmed spinster's ready emotion. 'And they have the best attention before, and at, and after, the event, and all on the National Health, absolutely free of charge.'

'And,' Sally added, 'some lucky, childless, doting couple adopt the little pure-bred Irishman, good luck to them.'

Miss Brook looked scandalised.

'I didn't realise it was as bad as that. I thought it happened over here, because they were primitive, innocent, Catholic peasants.'

Sally laughed.

'Not at all. Simple, perhaps, but far from innocent. This kind, not all, of course. From their point of view it's just too easy. The kind-hearted, loose-principled, heretic English will look after them free of charge, so they can go home with money in their pockets and no encumbrances.'

'It ought to be stopped.'

'How? Insist on a pregnancy test before engaging a girl as a cleaner? No. You can't stop people thinking up little tricks to get something for nothing. When there is so much offered, too. Don't you do it yourself?'

Miss Brook flushed angrily.



‘Of course you don’t,’ said Sally, hastily. ‘I wasn’t serious. This spring sunshine has gone to my head.’

They went back to their department.

The afternoon dragged. Sally cleared her routine work out of the way, signed some letters, and found herself, at three o’clock, outside her office, caught in the confusion of visitors, as they surged into the main hall.

It was an official visiting afternoon. The relations and friends came singly or in groups; many had children in their arms or led by the hand. Nearly all carried bunches of daffodils and narcissi and anemones, so that it seemed less a pious duty to the sick than a festival of spring, taking place, with all the ancient upsurging of spirit at that season, in this modern shrine of science.

Catching her breath a little, Sally retreated into her own room to think. She felt light-headed again, as she had done, spread in the sun on the warm flags of the path outside the staff canteen. She tried to drag her thoughts back to her work. Useless to go to the Geriatric Ward to see if there were any more convalescents ready. The old people either had visitors, or would be mourning their loneliness. No place for her today. And at present the benches outside her office were empty. It was too early for problems referred from the Out-patient departments to reach her. These clinics would, only now, be settling down to their afternoon sessions.

She looked at her engagement pad and her diary. Nothing that needed her immediate attention. Of course she could make work for herself. She could call in Miss May or Miss Brook to discuss their cases with her. But she preferred not to do this, especially in the case of Miss Brook. For this conscientious and competent, but somehow unsuccessful worker, should, according to her age and experience, have been at the head of a department by now. Her increasing touchiness, as shown after lunch on that day, confirmed Sally’s suspicion that she was painfully aware of the fact.

So on no account would she bring into focus Miss Brook subordinate status.

As for Peggy May—— Mrs Fulton got up from her desk at this point, wandering to her window to lean out and breathe in the magical air. And she knew how she meant to use her time for the next half-hour, visitors or no visitors; that she had planned it so from the beginning of the day. She meant to see Tony's new wife; curiosity had overcome diffidence, over prejudice; the burning curiosity had possessed her since the moment he had explained that he had not, after all, married Hazel Creighton.

Arriving outside Hunter Ward, Sally Fulton stood to the side, allowing the procession of flower-bearing visitors to stream past her. A nurse looked out of the ward kitchen and saw her.

'Can I help you, Mrs Fulton?'

'Well,' Sally hesitated, then invented. 'I wanted a quick word with Dr Fulton. But I suppose his wife is here.'

She thought she had spoken quite impersonally, but at the same time, Nurse gave her a sharp look, then blushed, then went towards the ward to look through the clear circle in the frosted glass of the ward door.

Most of the curtains were drawn back, to give the visitors more room to dispose themselves about the beds. Only the very sick were enclosed.

'Yes. Actually she is. I thought she might not be, as she comes up every evening.'

'Does she? Because he's a doctor?'

'Yes. In a way. She stays longer than the others. Wives or husbands are allowed in anyway for half an hour.' Nurse hesitated, looking again through the door. 'She's getting up to pull his curtains now. They don't like so many people about, I expect. Really, doctors are awful patients, I think. Everyone knows they usually get complications, and apart from that, they don't keep any of the rules.'

'Not even Sister Collett's rules?'

'Oh, he does what *she* says.'

The nurse spoke in a voice of awe, unwilling to imagine anyone defying Sister. Sally laughed.

'I can just go in, can't I?'

The nurse smiled again.

She said, 'I'll take you, if you like.'

Sally knew that the other's helpfulness was chiefly prompted by a wish to see the past and present wives of Mr Fulton confront one another. Nevertheless she accepted the nurse's offer, and followed her up the ward, quite pleased to be spared the necessity of drawing aside the cubicle curtains for herself.

The introduction, however, was of the briefest. The nurse, with a gasp of her nerve at the last second, pulled the curtain aside, moved back to reveal Sally, said 'Mrs—— the Almoner,

Call in' in a choked voice, and fled. Sally stepped forward into a room seeing two sitting figures where she had expected one. She spread and lost her nerve. Her opening speech, 'You must be Mr Fulton. How d'you do?' was no longer possible, since she did not know which of the two women she ought to address.

The moment was over, however, long before her discomfort could pass to the others. For Tony, a stronger, more active Tony, sat forward from his bank of pillows, and indicating the girl on his right hand, said, 'This is Madeleine. Darling, this is Sally.'

They shook hands limply, and then the other girl, Madeleine's unmarried sister, was introduced. This one got up at once, saying, 'Do have my chair. I was just going. I simply must get some shopping done.'

She vanished before Sally could protest, so there was nothing for the latter to do but take the vacant chair and sit down, feeling very peculiar indeed.

The new Mrs Fulton seemed perfectly unconcerned. She was dark, with almost straight, thick hair, cut short, with a lock falling over her forehead, and the sides brushed back. She had clear-cut regular features, and large greenish-brown

eyes, and she was handsome rather than pretty. She was well-dressed in casual fashionable clothes; a black jumper with its three-quarter sleeves pulled up, a brown pleated skirt, a gold and green scarf at her neck, held by a steel double ring, one end tucked inside the jumper and the other flung out on her shoulder. She wore filigree steel ear-rings, the size of a halfpenny, and flat black suede shoes. A brown coat flecked with black hung over the chair where she sat.

Sally noted all these things, while she asked the usual polite questions, and made the usual encouraging hospital remarks about Tony. But the thing that kept her rigid, and her face stern with repressed feeling; the thing that prevented any friendly note in her voice, any warmth of forgiving, any easy forgetfulness of her own position, was one simple inevitable observation. Which was that Madeleine resembled Hazel, in general appearance, manner of speech, and probable intelligence, just as closely as two totally unrelated young women could do so. In fact, though Tony had not actually married Hazel Creighton, by discovering and marrying her near counter-part, he had done what Sally had always suspected him of doing. He had left her for the Hazel type, if not for Hazel. The old situation, as she had always seen it, was true after all.

This dramatic conclusion, with all its emotional overtones, and its essential over-simplification, did much less than justice to Madeleine Fulton, who was trying her best to indulge her sick husband's peculiar whim. When Sally, after ten awkward minutes, rose to go, shook hands again, quite unnecessarily, and disappeared through the curtains, Madeleine turned her large untroubled eyes on Tony and said, 'You needn't look so smug. Other men have had harems, active ones, too.'

'She-devil. I'll remember that when I'm strong again.'

She picked up his hand and laid it against her cheek.

'Tony, were you ever really in love with her?'

'Yes. At one time. Very much so.'

'What happened?'

'You know. I've told you, often.'

'Only the outside story. What really started the quarrelling?'

'She was always right.'

'Oh. Yes. She might take that line.'

'No. I don't mean she set herself up as always right. She *was* right. More often than not. It frightened me. I couldn't take it.'

Madeleine turned his hand over and kissed the palm.

'I'm nearly always wrong, aren't I? Rather a dim-wit.'

'It wasn't intellectual with Sally. It was worse than that. She was fundamentally right, if you see what I mean. She didn't try to be. She couldn't help it.'

Madeleine screwed up her face in an effort to comprehend: then shook her head.

'No understand, signore. It looks to me as if she was always wrong—about you. I don't get, I'm afraid.'

He drew her close to kiss her.

'I like you better that way, darling.'

It was nearly a week before Sally saw her former husband again. Though his parting words on the last occasion had been, 'Drop in again soon, won't you?' and she had promised that she would, she had avoided Hunter Ward deliberately. After all, he was out of danger, and he had his wife, still staying in the town and making regular visits to the hospital every day, both in and out of the proper visiting hours. As the nurse had said, doctor patients had unusual privileges, and were something of a nuisance.

So Sally found plenty of excuse for not seeing Tony, until her professional duty demanded it.

She found him hanging half out of his bed, exploring the bottom compartment of his locker. He looked up sideways at her from this position, and grinned.

'Thank God it's only you. Sister Collett has already ticked me off for being too mobile.'

Sally laughed.

'Can I find it for you? Whatever you're looking for.'

'No. That would be making you an accomplice.'

'What do you mean?'

'Ah!'

'Something forbidden to eat? Or drink?'

He scrambled back into the middle of his bed and slid down until only his head and face appeared above the sheet.

'Don't ask leading questions. Sit down and talk.'

Sally obeyed. She was pleased to find him so strong now, and in such good spirits. She also rejoiced to think that he would soon be well enough to leave the hospital, and she would not have to visit him again. Her voice was warm with these contentments when she spoke.

'I came to see you about your convalescence. Routine, of course. I'm sure you've made your own plans.'

He looked at her, smiling.

'Well, yes. I don't think I'll go to Blechley, admirable as it seems to be. Madeleine's parents live near Brixham. I'm arranging to go there for a month. After that, I don't see why I shouldn't start work.'

'Gastrics generally have three months off, don't they? Or more, for perforations.'

'Gastrics who normally do heavy physical work, yes. But I work from nine to five; office hours. Most of them I spend quietly sitting staring at films, and making diagnoses and writing up the appropriate reports. A real gentleman's existence. My assistant and technicians do all the real work.'

'Isn't there a rush at times? Or an emergency? Or one of these complicated tests, looking down windpipes, and then putting stuff in to photograph the tubes?'

'The physicians and surgeons take a hand at all that.'

'But you have to be in the operating theatre sometimes when the orthopaedic surgeon is doing things to bones.'

'Yes. The chief rush is when there's a factory accident with a number of casualties. But that doesn't happen very often.'

'You really are the big noise in your present job, aren't you? I mean——'

She stopped. She was thinking of the time when he would ring her up to say his work was keeping him, and he would be late for dinner, or would find something to eat before going home. In fairness to him, he had not then been the boss.

Tony did not appear to have noticed her hesitation, and her unfinished remark. He nodded gravely.

'I've need to be. Schooling will start in four years from now.'

She stared at him.

'You mean—I didn't know——'

She turned her head away.

'No one who knew us both ever talks to me about you.'

She kept her head turned, to avoid his face. So that, too, had been her fault. Or had it been just the final proof of their incompatibility? She fell back on conventional expression.

'You must be very proud of him. Is he like you?'

'To look at? No. Madeleine's colouring.'

'That's lovely, isn't it?' Gaining courage from the easy way she had taken the last obstacle, she said, 'You know, she reminds me quite a lot of Hazel.'

He frowned at that, looking both bewildered and sulky.

'You mentioned that girl before! I've been trying to place her. I can't.'

'Hazel Creighton. She was assistant in the path lab at St Nicholas. You—saw a good deal of her at one time—while we were engaged.'

'*That* girl! Was her name Hazel? I believe you're right. You were jealous of her.'

'Yes. I was very jealous.'

'I couldn't understand it at the time. I'd never taken her seriously, but I certainly was taking you seriously. And yet you were jealous.'

Sally looked at him steadily.

'I was jealous because I didn't feel sure of you; or perhaps, more, because I didn't feel sure of myself.'

She tried to smile. She wanted to give an impression of detached worldly wisdom; of looking back, with tolerance, at her former inexperience.

'I always felt I was lacking in glamour.'

Tony was embarrassed. He was sorry the conversation had taken this turn, but he blamed himself. He ought to have known how it would develop. He spoke with deliberate lightness.

'You had plenty of the sort of glamour I wanted then. Which was not Hazel's kind, though I must say I hardly remember her. Don't try to analyse. Late post-mortems are the most unsavoury.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to drag up things. It was just finding that your wife reminded me so much of Hazel. It made me realise how little I'd ever understood you.'

He began to feel irritated; this bulldog honesty! He controlled himself with a great effort. He reached out to pat her arm.

'It wasn't me you didn't understand. I'm ordinary enough. You're too good, Sally. You always were. Too fair. And goodness has its limitations. Forget it.'

They parted quite cheerfully. This time he did not ask her to drop in again soon. They both knew she would not.

On the way back from Hunter Ward Sally Fulton would have allowed herself to feel hurt by Tony's reflections had not her old abiding guilt drowned the lesser emotion. She was, however, totally preoccupied by her feelings, and only came to herself with a start when she heard her name called. She stood still, very conscious that the assistant surgeon, Richard Lane, was barring her path with his large frame.

She looked up at his frankly smiling face, and felt her heart lighten.

'Have you come from Hunter?'

'Yes, Mr Lane.'

'Did you see that patient of mine? Bed Ten? Can't remember his name?'



'Willis. No, I didn't see him. He won't be going out yet, will he?'

'Next week, I hope.' He hesitated, looking at his watch. 'I'd like to talk to you about him, sometime. I can't now.'

'I'm going back to the office. I'll be there for the rest of today.'

He looked at his watch again.

'Shan't be through in time. Could you—— Why don't we find a meal somewhere this evening? Are you free?'

It was too obvious, and most clumsily done. But her heart lifted again. Why not? Why not, indeed?

'Yes, I'm free.' She said it with great inward conviction, and great thankfulness. 'I usually leave here about half-past five.'

'I shan't be finished till seven, at least. Meet me at seven-thirty.'

He named the only good restaurant in Holmwood.

'If I'm going to be any later I'll ring you.'

'I'll give you my number.'

She wrote it down on the little pad she carried with her to the wards. It was only after he had smiled his thanks and gone on his way that she remembered, with a strange pang, that it had been Richard Lane who had operated on Tony. Was Tony the real focus of his interest? Did he want to know about Tony through her, because she had been Tony's wife? She was quite prepared to find it so. She was quite ready to sacrifice her newly-found importance.

## Chapter V

RICHARD LANE was one of those large-framed men, who of necessity, and through bitter experience in adolescence, have trained themselves to speak quietly, think carefully, and move gently, with great deliberation.

But he was much more than a big, soft-voiced, kindly personage. He had an excellent brain, acute powers of observation, and first-rate manual dexterity. All of which qualities led him slowly but inevitably towards the heights of specialisation, where, at the age of thirty-five, he was now firmly established.

The way had not been easy for him. With the minimum of support from a widowed mother, and relying chiefly upon scholarships and grants, he had kept on his course of higher examinations, and poorly-paid hospital posts, where many would have descended into the easier, more quickly remunerative field of general medicine. More than once he had considered it. He came of a line of doctors, stretching back for four generations. He scarcely remembered his own father, since he had been barely seven years old when the latter died; but he knew he had worked a prosperous small-town practice in friendly competition with the other medical men of the place. His grandfather, too, had been in general practice, inclined to surgery, and able to practise that too, to a notable extent, at the local cottage hospital, while continuing to call himself a G.P.

But general practice in the National Health Service held very different prospects for Richard. A moderate, stable income, high professional expenses, no holiday unless he had partners, or was prepared to pay a *locum* heavy fees, and a small Government pension at the end of it, consisting of only one eightieth of the total earnings of his

professional life. Very little scope, too, in his work, since the hospitals would now be barred to him; his function with regard to them being merely to supply cases for diagnosis and treatment. He would become a writer of certificates, a kind of glorified chemist's assistant for the supply of medicine and dressings for minor ailments, and a sorting house for urgent or dangerous cases.

Richard Lane knew he would never be satisfied with such conditions. He had the intelligence and skill to go further. Chiefly, he had the overriding curiosity of the born scientist. He never stopped wanting to know how, and why. He was never content until he had the answers. And he started with an indispensable asset; an inherited aptitude, passed to him down the long line of his medical forebears, for knowing when a patient was truly ill, and when he was not. No terror-stricken hypochondriac could panic him out of this deep-based knowledge. No foolhardy, self-assured braggart, minimising grave symptoms, could mislead him. He was completely reliable.

But he had never been spectacular. Where less clever men than he had galloped through their higher examinations to grasp a much-coveted post at their teaching hospitals, Richard Lane had progressed by deliberate, well-consolidated stages. And in doing so had added hugely to his practical experience. By the time he reached the Holmwood General he was a highly-skilled operator in all branches of general surgery. He was beginning to show his preference for surgical problems of the thyroid gland.

In all these years he had never met a girl he in the least wished to marry. It was not that he could not afford to marry, or did not want to be married. Girls nearly all had jobs these days, and could continue in them for a time. And though the hospitals where he worked, after leaving his graded specialist job in the Army at the end of the war, teemed with working girls, not one of the women students, nurses, or technical assistants, not one of the various auxiliaries in physio- or occupational-therapy, roused the smallest romantic stirrings in him.

He regretted this in a vaguely melancholy way, but he

was too busy with his career to find much time for desponding, and he frequently experimented with girls he met outside the hospitals, whose looks pleased him, or who seemed in other ways desirable. While the attraction lasted, he gave them a very good time, to the limit of his means, and his very curtailed free time. He often inspired in their hearts a passion that died painfully on his highly-skilled and, to them, completely baffling retreat. But he did them no harm. With a wisdom beyond his years, and that masculine dislike of explanation, so perennially exasperating to women, he simply loosened the clinging hands, very gently and kindly put them from him, and went on his way. The girl had not come up to expectations. He was bored. Nothing on earth would have led him to tell her so.

Sally Fulton was not in the succession. She was an entirely new experience. When Richard Lane arrived at the Holmwood General Sally had been there for just over six months, so as far as he was concerned she was part of the general set-up, and he took her and her department completely for granted. There always was a 'Lady Almoner'; she was an institution he expected to find in any hospital.

He was soon aware of her nick-name. This seemed to him not to suit her looks, and to be rather silly in any case. He knew nothing of her history until her former husband came under his urgent care. Even then it was only the name that excited his curiosity.

'Any relation of the Almoner's?' he asked, in the operating theatre, glancing at the muffled form on the table.

He was standing back, gloved finger-tips together, while Theatre Sister and the houseman spread the sterile cloths over the two ends of the victim, and painted the whole abdomen with bright pink cetavlon.

The anaesthetist obligingly lifted away the mask from the man's face.

'No, Dick,' he said. 'No resemblance. Not a relation, as you meant it. Couldn't be, come to think of it.'

'No, of course. Silly of me. Only an in-law, might be. She's married, isn't she?'

'Was,' said Sister. A third sheet now covered the patient, who presented a neat oblong, with a narrow window on the upper abdomen, showing a strip of stained skin.

Sister handed Richard a swab on a holder and held the little bowl of cetavlon, while he sloshed on a further generous quantity.

'This, in fact,' said the anæsthetist, 'is her late husband.'

Richard's eyes gleamed over his mask.

'Isn't that a little premature?' he asked politely. 'Or have you killed him already? A record, even for you, John. Need I operate?'

He took the scalpel from Sister's hand as he spoke and rapidly made his incision.

'She divorced him,' said the anæsthetist. 'That's right, isn't it, Sister?'

Sister did not answer. She was shocked to hear them discussing this man's sins over his unconscious body. Whatever he'd done, he had a perforated gastric now, and was paying for it.

'Ex- then, not late,' murmured Richard, as he made his way through the peritoneum. 'God, he's a mess.'

He was not referring to the patient's moral state, but to the picture presented by his interior. The anæsthetist and the houseman bent their heads to look, and in the proceedings that followed Dr Tony Fulton's past lost interest beside his more than problematical future.

But Richard Lane did not forget what he had learned about Sally Fulton. The strange intrusion of her past on the operating table only precipitated an interest that had been growing steadily for the last few weeks. From the time of his successful operation on old Mr Gurney. He had been touched by her efforts on the old man's behalf. He had talked to her and found her amusing, attractive, and very human.

He remembered now that she had been the first person to befriend him at the Holmwood General. When he made his very first entry into Hunter Ward Mrs Fulton had been

talking to the patient in Bed Twelve. She had looked at him, given him a polite good-morning, and without even asking him who he was, had said, 'Shall I find Sister for you?'

While he waited, leaving this quest in her hands, the patient had said, 'Lady Almoner, that was. Proper peach. None of the others is a patch on 'er.'

Then, before he could answer, Sister Collett, very correct and unsmiling, was at his elbow, saying, 'Mr Lane, isn't it?' and he could only nod, and mutter, 'Yes. Can you tell me which are my beds, please, Sister?'

In this way Sally Fulton had always been linked in his mind with the easy surmounting of an early obstacle; it was inevitable that he thought of her, though less enthusiastically than the patient in Bed Twelve, as a person who was helpful; who not only could, but did, relieve one of an embarrassing moment. From the start he liked her looks, and found her quiet, tireless industry most admirable.

For some time now he had waited for an opportunity to see her outside the hospital, and away from her work. When she accepted his invitation without hesitating, his heart warmed to her still further. A vague knight-errantry surprised his unsentimental heart. He found himself wishing to protect her from any further contact with her former husband. He knew that they had met, for the whole hospital had gossipped freely of her special visits to Hunter Ward, and of her meeting with the second wife. And while he longed to spare her any possible further discomfort on Tony Fulton's account, he also burned with a frankly jealous wish to know exactly what the admittedly plausible fellow had done to her.

He was five minutes late at the restaurant, and Sally was there, waiting. This annoyed him, but he forgave her when she apologised for being early.

'My watch is fast,' she said. 'I encourage it, so as to be in time at the hospital. And then I forget, and think I shall be late.'

This very human confession pleased him. He sat down beside her, in the entrance lounge of the restaurant, where she had been placed to wait for him, and ordered two drinks. While he waited for them to arrive he delivered his stock small talk on the subject of Holmwood; the town, the citizens, the architecture. This gave him ample opportunity to look at Sally Fulton out of uniform.

She was wearing a well-cut dress, with a wide skirt, made of a heavy finely-corded silk, whose name he did not know. A conventional blue, that went well with her fair hair and large grey eyes. Not an exciting dress; not at all exotic; simple and pleasing, but not girlish. He would not have admired it at all if it had been more sophisticated.

After they had been shown to their table in the dining-room, and he had persuaded Sally to choose the dishes she liked best, he tried to hand her the lead in the conversation.

'Do you always want other people to choose your food?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, it was quite uphill work getting you to say what you wanted.'

'I'm sorry.' She gave him a slow smile. 'I'm afraid I'm rather lazy—out of working hours.'

'I'm glad you added that. No one at the General would dream of calling you lazy. In fact, you're the exact opposite.'

She did not answer this, but went on dreamily, 'And then I so seldom go out now, I feel I've forgotten all the exciting things there are to eat.'

'That sounds terrible. I can hardly believe it. You've lived in these parts a long time, haven't you? A person like you must have hosts of friends.'

She looked at him squarely, and then said, 'Most of them were Tony's friends, and stayed that way.'

'I'm sorry.'

It was one of the things he had wanted to know, and hadn't understood, but the answer was disconcerting and final. He cursed his ineptitude.

Sally Fulton, however, did not seem to be at all put out.

She went on calmly eating her dinner, in a contentment surprised her not a little.

'You said at the hospital,' she began, a moment later, 'that you wanted to talk to me about Willis in Bed To Hunter. That is really why we're here, isn't it?'

He smiled at her, neither denying nor confirming this.

'I don't think I want to talk about him just now. It isn't a very pretty case to explain.'

'I don't think you need. I know the outlines.'

She knew already that Willis, who was a small shop-keeper, in middle-age, had come into the General with a non-malignant disease of his large bowel, which was causing obstruction. The gut had had to be brought to an artificial opening in the abdomen, in order to put the obstructed and diseased part at rest, out of action. Willis had accepted the very real affliction entailed in this proceeding, and was making heroic efforts to adapt himself to it.

'Do you know Mrs Willis? An old devil if ever there was one.'

'No. I haven't come across her.'

'You will. She threatens to leave Willis, if he goes home with his colostomy.'

'How can he do anything else?'

'How indeed? I might be able to put him back one day. If his diverticulitis clears up. But it would be risky. Anyway, he's of very poor physique. He'll probably die of something else before I get the chance.'

'After all he's been through, poor man! And I suppose they've been married for years?'

'Oh, yes. Raised a family, nearly all independent now. He's never let her down, as far as I know. Now she can only say that it's insanitary. Insanitary! It's her attitude that stinks.'

'Has Sister spoken to her?'

'Oh, yes. She keeps saying she can't have him sitting about at home. It would send her nuts. And he can't go on running the shop in his present state, she says; it would drive the customers away.'



'Not when he learns to manage. They always do. Is Miss Gorley fixing him up yet, with his appliance?'

'Next week. The thing is, can you get him anywhere after Blechley, so that he needn't go home until he's sufficiently regulated not to upset the old bitch? Sorry, but I feel strongly on the subject.'

'I don't blame you. I'll try, but it may take time. Perhaps he belongs to something useful in the way of a club, or society. Shopkeeper, did you say? He might be a Freemason. There's a digest of all the known charities. I'll see if I can find something to fit his case.'

Richard thanked her, hoping the subject of Willis was now exhausted, but not seeing quite how he might bring the talk back to more personal topics.

While he was searching for an opening Sally began again.

'I don't know if people are more selfish or less considerate than they used to be, or simply devoid of imagination,' she said. 'They just don't want ever to have illness in any form in their own homes these days. You wouldn't believe how many husbands and wives and parents and children ask me to put away their next of kin in some kind of institution, preferably a hospital, when all the poor things need is a little ordinary care and affection.'

She began to describe the case of Mr Gurney, and his story led on to others. Her fund of anecdote seemed to be inexhaustible.

The meal was nearly over. Richard felt himself sinking into a mild despair. He did not disagree with one word that Sally spoke. Most of it was new to him; all of it was interesting, of social importance, provoking thought and argument. But he was utterly bored. He had not asked Mrs Fulton to dine with him in order to hear a lecture on the problems of an auxiliary branch of medical welfare. When he left the hospital he made it a fixed rule to leave 'shop' and questions of 'shop' behind him, until the next day, or the next emergency call. He had invited Sally to discover more of her, not of her work.

But he was a patient man, and very tenacious. So he let

his eyes roam gently over her face and figure while giving her his polite attention. And when the meal was over, he suggested they should go back to the lounge for their coffee. Having settled her there, he went away to give his order, and stayed away a further five minutes in order to clinch the break in the conversation. Shock treatment, he decided, was needed here.

Sally Fulton, vaguely perturbed, waited for his re-appearance. There was something vaguely menacing in this sudden break in the evening's entertainment. It reminded her of some of her early encounters with Tony. Not for the first time she thought of her first meeting with Richard in the wards, a repeat performance, almost word for word, of her first meeting with Tony. As she waited she accused herself of unbridled chatter, but at the same time reminded herself of his attentive eyes, his apparently deep interest in what she said. He was wonderfully easy to talk to, she decided. With Tony she had always had the feeling of acting a part, even after she was married to him. And she had watched herself acting, had criticised the performance, sometimes to the point of despair. There seemed to be no danger of her putting on an act for Richard Lane.

The coffee arrived before he came back into the lounge. When he did join her he exclaimed at her untouched, cooling, cup. She shook her head.

'I needn't have poured it out. I left yours. I can't drink it very hot; I burn myself.'

He looked away from her and remarked in exactly the same conversational tone he had used all the evening, 'Tell me, what did you think of the new Mrs Fulton?'

An extraordinary anger flamed in Sally. She replied at once, without thinking, forgetting he knew no detail of her history.

'I thought she was exactly like Hazel, and it was typical of him to have married her! Madeleine, I mean.'

'Who is, or was, Hazel?'

'A girl who worked in the lab at St Nicholas. Tony says now that he never took any real notice of her. But he did—I swear he did!'

She spoke with unexpected passion, and Richard Lane, amused as well as stimulated by the success of his tactic, looked deep into her eyes, and smiled.

'Tell me,' he said. 'Let it out, for once.'

As if it were an abscess, he added to himself. A cold abscess, lying all these years in the deepest part of her mind.

But he knew he was not really concerned with the cure of her emotional hurt. What really pleased him was the new fire in her eyes and the warmth of her voice. At last there was a woman beside him, not a welfare worker.

'We had been engaged for nearly a month,' Sally said. 'I hardly knew of her existence, and then, one day, when I was going from the wards to the Out-patients—the path lab at St Nicholas is a separate building, like at the General—I saw him with her. She was leaning up against the door on the outside, making the most of her figure——'

Richard laughed suddenly, and Sally blushed.

'Catty, I know. Well, he was facing her. He didn't see or hear me, but she did. She could look over his shoulder from the top doorstep of the lab, and she stared at me, and smiled. It was the sort of smile that cuts like a knife, or like an unkind word. It hurts—physically.'

She touched herself between her breasts to show where such a hurt was felt, and he nodded gravely.

'And then?'

'Oh, I saw them chatting again and again. It got to be a nightmare, an obsession. I began to talk about her to him, and each time—it made me madder each time—he would ask who I meant. He was talking to her every day, it seemed to me, and denied he even knew of her existence! I didn't believe him. I simply couldn't believe him!'

Her voice shook a little, remembering this essential first treachery. She turned her hot eyes down to the table between them. Richard Lane, controlling a strong impulse to stretch out a hand to find hers, sat very still, watching her.

'Would you have believed him?' she asked, suddenly. 'He was talking to her practically every day. How could he

not know who I meant, even who she was? Not even her name—he pretended.'

'What happened?' Lane's voice was very quiet; he had not answered her question.

'I wasn't going to let her get away with it. But I wasn't going to put ideas into Tony's head if they were not already there.'

'He was to remain the Fairy Prince, even if he was betraying you with the vamp of the lab?'

Her face had grown pale from remembered pain, but now it flushed angrily.

'We were engaged! I suspected her, I was furiously jealous of her, but I trusted *him*.'

'You trusted him.'

The quiet voice again jolted her insincerity.

'I was determined to trust him.'

'Not quite the same thing.'

'I was determined she shouldn't win!'

'That's better,' he said, enchanted by the ring in her voice.

'You must think it all very silly. And squalid. It didn't seem so at the time. It seemed horrible. We were both fighting for Tony without letting him know, because we were afraid of putting him off.'

'Ah!' Richard was delighted.

'I won.' The triumph in her voice was unmistakable. 'I won!'

'Good for you. How?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'Yes.'

She was holding nothing back now. She was talking straight from her heart. It did not occur to her to find this strange.

'The lab closed at one on Saturdays. There were always things to be seen to in the morning, cultures—is that right—from the wards, to be planted out, and slides looked at, and the week's work generally to be tidied up. She left her work one Saturday morning, to wait for Tony where she

knew he would pass. I think it was to be a grand effort to get him to take her out instead of me. She left some cultures on her bench not planted out; they had come down late but that was usual. This was at half-past twelve. I was going past the lab at one when the senior technician there saw me. He said he was leaving, but if I saw Hazel to tell her to lock up when she'd finished. He'd left the keys in the door.

When he had gone I locked the door and took the keys to the office. They were put on the special board where they hung at night and over the week-end, so that the housemen could get them if they wanted to go into the lab.'

Sally paused. She had got so far in a burst of grateful confidence. Only now her first doubts troubled her. But Richard was watching her closely, she saw, almost breathlessly, as if he found her story very absorbing. She saw no trace of censoriousness in his expression. So she went on, speaking now more rapidly.

'It wasn't right to leave the lab unlocked with no one in it. She could have got the key if she'd ever thought of it. I don't believe she went back there at all. She said on the Monday that she had, but no one believed her. The cultures were ruined, of course. They hadn't been planted out, or whatever you do to them. She swore she tried to get into the lab again at one. But she definitely didn't ask the office for the key. And when she knew it had been taken there, she had nothing more to say. You see, she knew that I knew she had gone to the cinema with Tony that afternoon.'

Richard's head came up with a jerk.

'I thought you were going out with him, determined not to let her, etc.——'

'I changed my mind.'

His laugh made several people at tables nearby look up. Sally's cheeks burned again.

'I had to know,' she insisted, in a low voice. 'Don't you see, I had to know if he wanted to go out with her.'

'So then you did know?'

'I didn't. I thought I did. But I only made it worse confused. After Hazel left——'

'Oh, Hazel left?'

'Yes. She left of her own accord. She had a row about the plates, I suppose, but it wasn't enough to fire her, obviously. But she decided to go. So it wasn't really my doing.'

'You only showed her where she got off?'

'I suppose so. I didn't care at the time. I was glad. I'd been so fiercely jealous.'

She broke off, and said anxiously, with a sad look that stirred his compassion afresh, 'Did I behave very badly?'

He could laugh again at the question and answer with exaggerated gravity, 'Terribly.'

'No. I'm serious.'

'Sally,' he said, using her Christian name to her for the first time, 'battles between women are always serious, and shameless, and terrifying, and wonderful. I think poor Fulton must have been completely out of his depth between the pair of you.'

'I don't know. He says he doesn't remember her at all, or hardly at all. And yet Madeleine, his wife, is exactly like Hazel.'

They were back where they had started. With a difference. Now she was not afraid to confide in him, but only of being found a bore.

'I'm sure we've talked about my affairs more than enough,' she said, stating simply what she thought he must think, but looking at him with soft eyes that asked for further indulgence.

'Not if you want to say any more,' he answered, in a low voice. 'And I'm not just being polite. The whole situation is unusual, you must agree. I find it—intriguing.' He had nearly said, 'Entertaining,' but caught back the word in time.

'There isn't any more to the story,' Sally went on, with a sad smile. 'I thought I'd saved my engagement and my marriage and Tony's happiness. But I hadn't.'

'It's always risky,' said Richard Lane, 'to impose your will on events.'

'Is it? Don't you do it all the time, yourself? When you decide to operate, for instance.'

'Professional decisions are quite different. I meant personal events. In personal relationships.'

'I see.'

She made the conventional answer, but was, in fact, not enlightened.

When they parted outside her block of flats, Richard found himself very reluctant to leave her. He muttered the compliments he usually dispensed to the women he had entertained, and which he usually despised.

'It's been a great privilege; I've enjoyed every minute of of the evening. I hope you'll do this again, some time.'

She stopped him with a little gay laugh.

'I'm sure you couldn't bear a repeat performance of the confession. I don't know how I had the nerve to make it, but you led me on, you know. I should feel thoroughly ashamed of myself; I am sure I will tomorrow.'

'Oh, well——'

'It's been marvellously good for me.'

'I can see that, if I may say so.'

'Oh, you may. I'm very grateful. For that and for the lovely dinner—and everything.'

She held out her hand and he took it, letting it go again almost at once, which caused her a vague, but definite, disappointment.

'Goodbye, then, till next time, Sally. I'll get in touch. See you soon.'

'Goodnight, Richard.'

He drove off without looking round, though she had not moved away from the pavement. With another little twinge of uneasiness she went up the narrow path towards her door.

## *Chapter VI*

FOR the whole of the next morning Sally was astonished at the pleasure she took in her work and in everyone she met.

The day was fine. The April sun had an added warmth, which reached down into her heart, to speed the thaw that had already begun there. The sky was a deeper blue than she had ever seen; the clouds, whether chiselled white overhead, or softly hung on the horizon, built a more splendid canopy; and the cherry-blossom, on the small trees of the hospital lawn, seemed a sparkling miracle just above her, as she stood looking up at it.

Happiness had been for so many years so rare an experience, she did not at once recognise it for what it was. And when, since the feeling persisted as this golden day marched on, she did understand its magnificence, she was ready to cry at it. First, for thankfulness, and secondly, for hope. She had thought of herself, at thirty-four, too old for any more adventures. Her deep content on this day told her that she had misjudged her own inclination. She was still too cautious, much too frightened by her marriage, to reach any conclusions about Richard Lane. It was enough that he had spent an evening with her, and had told her that he wanted to spend another.

She remembered what he had said. 'It is always risky to try to impose your will on events.' She was determined to take no risk of that here. She would wait patiently: allow the future to flow gently towards her. While she continued in her present happiness, she wanted nothing more.

On this wonderfully fine day, the rest of the almoning staff, though not elevated as Sally was, nevertheless felt the unmistakable quickening of spring. Even Miss Brook,



harassed as usual by her work, and even more by her knowledge of her failure to cope with it, took courage from the sun, if only to pass her problem into Sally's more competent hands.

'Oh, do come in, Dora,' said Sally, pleasantly, looking up from the personal letter she was writing in long hand.

Miss Brook smiled. She was on friendly terms with Sally, but usually they avoided using names at all in their converse with one another. Christian names, to Miss Brook, implied a certain intimacy which did not exist between them. Her inclination was to call her colleague plain Fulton, but she knew this form of address was out of date, particularly between women. She was determined never to be a cause of amusement to the typists.

But Sally's greeting on this day was so unforced and so smiling that Miss Brook's confined soul stirred in its cage: her answering smile, for her, was brilliant.

'It's this letter,' she said. 'They had my name when you were away over Christmas. But originally Mrs Trinder was one of your special cases.'

'Mrs Trinder!' Sally's surprise matched her immediate dread. 'Of course I remember her. From Lister Ward. She did very well. Her husband isn't strong, and absolutely devoted to her.'

'Yes,' answered Miss Brook, grimly. 'She was up at Out-patients for her three-monthly check, and she's down for urgent admission. I believe they're taking her in again almost at once. This letter is from the husband.'

Sally held out her hand for it.

'Don't go,' she said.

The letter was short, written in a careful, clerkly handwriting. Mrs Trinder's husband told her that the news was bad, and asked if he might be allowed to come and see her the next afternoon.

'But that's today!' Sally exclaimed.

'She's coming in this afternoon, I suppose. He'll be coming with her.'

'See if he's outside already. Do you mind, Dora?'

She wished very much that she had been given the letter that morning. She would have had time to go to Lister Ward and find out from Sister Martin there what had happened to Mrs Trinder since Christmas. As it was—— But how like poor Dora!

To Miss Brook's relief Mr Trinder was not waiting on the benches outside the almoners' office. It was possible that he had got on to a wrong bench, among the out-patients.

But he was not there, either, and the porters told her that Mrs Trinder had not yet been admitted. Miss Brook hurried back to Sally's room.

'Then I'll go and have a word with Sister Martin now,' the latter said. 'You can hold the fort till I get back. If Trinder turns up, tell him I shan't be away long, and would like to see him personally.'

'Yes—Sally,' answered Miss Brook, going back into the general office. She had a smile for each of the girls as she made her way to her own table.

'What's come over them?' Frances whispered to Diana during the afternoon tea-break. 'Saintly's been right up in the clouds all day, anyone could see, and now here's the babbling Brook all starry-eyed. Put the May blossom's nose out of joint, don't they?'

'It's the time of year,' said Diana, loftily. 'And in case you don't happen to know, Mrs Fulton was at Three Birds restaurant with Mr Lane last night. My boy-friend and I saw them come out and get into his car.'

'That long black one?'

'The Hillman. Yes.'

'It's a wizard car,' said Frances, with school-girlish enthusiasm.

Diana looked her contempt.

'I wonder what he sees in her,' she said, coldly

Frances was tired of being snubbed.

'I should think she might be rather smashing, dressed up,' she said. 'Her hair's a lovely shade: genuine blonde. And that natural wave, too. Fair hair's generally straight and

needs perming. Every four months for me, worst luck. She only needs a cut, and it's never out of place. She isn't bad-looking, either.'

'Well, I don't admire her looks.'

'You wouldn't.'

The unprofitable discussion lapsed.

Sally made her way to Lister Ward. The long sunny room looked very peaceful as she went in, closing the swing doors softly behind her. Some of the women were knitting or sewing, many were asleep. Neighbours gossiped in low voices, chiefly about their own, or other, almost as interesting, cases. But their voices did not disturb the general tranquillity. The storms and stresses of the morning, with its treatments, its washings and dressings, its visits from doctors, surgeons, pathologists, auxiliaries, the library, the canteen, the newspapers, had all died away. Exhausted, purged in body and soul, the patients floated gently towards the still distant, but now visible, harbour of restored health.

Or most of them did. Noting one or two drawn faces, inattentive, listless, but not sleeping, Sally felt an added pang of alarm for the Trinders. Such a touchingly devoted pair; they deserved well of fate. But fate is indifferent to human worth.

Sister Martin was sitting at her table half-way down the ward. She looked up as Sally approached.

'I didn't expect you this afternoon, Mrs Fulton,' she said, smiling.

'It's about Mrs Trinder,' said Sally. 'We've had a letter from her husband, saying she is coming in again today.'

'Yes,' answered Sister, cautiously. 'We've got Bed Twenty for her.'

'He wants to see me,' went on Sally, urgently. 'And I don't know anything about the present position, so I thought I'd like to have a word with you, first, to know where we stand. I suppose,' she hesitated, 'I suppose this means something serious?'

Sister Martin looked down her nose. She was not hostile to the welfare auxiliaries, but she was one of the old guard. In her training days, long distant, the ward sister had been the general confidant and adviser, and in her opinion was the best person for the job, since the medical details were an open book to her. These lay people, each dealing with a limited section of the patient's needs, each following set lines, and very often ignorant of the case, as a case—— In a way the almoners were different: there had always been almoners where she worked. But in the old days Mr Trinder would have come to her. After all, there wasn't much in gynæcology she didn't know.

'A recurrence,' suggested Sally, with a worried look, and added, in case Sister should think she was trespassing on forbidden ground, 'Mr Trinder has always passed on to me what the doctors have told him.'

'Yes,' answered Sister Martin, relenting a little. After all, Mrs Fulton never threw her weight about. She was untiring in her efforts for the convalescents, and they all adored her, and said so.

'Yes,' she went on. 'I haven't seen Mr Wakefield yet, but I'm afraid it's pretty hopeless. They are going to use radium, according to the Out-patient notes.'

She patted a folder that lay on her table.

'Mr Wakefield is coming round the ward later this afternoon. She ought to be in by then. She was told between half-past two and three.'

Sally looked at the ward clock. It was already five to three. She did not want to be caught in Lister when the Trinders arrived. She said hastily, 'Thank you, Sister. I expect Mr Wakefield has warned Trinder. He has been very out-spoken to him all along.'

'It was a bad case at the start,' said Sister.

'It seems so *unfair*,' Sally said, in a low tense voice. 'to the Trinders, of all people. When such marvellous things *can* be done, that they shouldn't get away with it.'

Sister moved the papers on her desk.

'You can't think of it that way,' she said, briskly. 'It

wouldn't do. We can only do our best. We can't work miracles, and we never shall.'

'But a lot that's done now seems like a miracle,' said Sally, thinking of Tony Fulton's rapid and uneventful retreat from death. 'And they do keep discovering new things all the time.'

Sister got up.

'Excuse me,' she said. Out of the corner of her eye she had seen the restless heave of blankets in Bed Nine. 'Nurse!' she said clearly, and a short figure came hurrying from further up the ward.

'I'll ask Trinder to see you as soon as they come,' said Sister Martin. 'I'll give him something to do while Mr Wakefield is seeing her.'

They were, by now, walking down the ward. Already Sister had given an order to the nurse, and was nearly at the door, pulling out a bunch of keys as she went.

Sally hurried after her. Sister was wonderful, she told herself. As she began to walk quickly down the stairs, the lift passed her, going up, and the gates clanged on the landing she had just left. Probably the Trinders. Would the grey distorted face she had seen in Bed Nine as she passed be hidden again? Would Sister have administered the relieving drug, and be ready, when the Trinders, inevitably afraid, entered the ward?

She was surprised at her own agitation, and then acknowledged it as part of her heightened awareness on that spring day. She turned out of the women's block, smiling at the small regiment of cots on the glass-fronted balcony of the maternity side. Slowing her steps, she stood again under the cherry blossom, worshipping the bright sun, and forgetting the ever-present shadows.

It was nearly four o'clock when Mr Trinder arrived in Sally's office. She was relieved to find very little change in his appearance. He wore the usual neat dark suit, and his undistinguished features were composed in their usual mild expression.

But he understood the full import of his wife's re-admission to hospital. It was clear that they both did, and had accepted it.

'The wife feels the same as I do,' explained Mr Trinder, sitting forward on his chair, and clasping his hands over the bowler hat on his knee. 'We know they want to do their best. They have done their best all along. But if they can't do any more, which is what Mr Wakefield tells me, because it seems to have spread to the glands and that, and they don't really know where it'll go next, well then, she'd prefer to be at home.'

He glanced down at the hat, which he was pressing hard on to his knee, gave a little apologetic sound, which might have been directed to it rather than to Sally, and laid it gently on the floor at his side.

'We've always been together,' he explained, quite uncomplaining and matter of fact. 'So we feel we ought to stay that way. Till the end,' he added.

Sally felt the unprofessional tears filling her eyes, and bent her head to make an unnecessary note on her pad. When she was fully in command of herself again she said, 'I'm sure they will want you both to do exactly as you wish. After all, you'll have your own doctor, and he can get you the district nurse, and Home Helps to do the housework. In fact, I can start all the domestic side going for you before Mrs Trinder leaves here. Wouldn't it be a good thing to have Meals on Wheels? You know, the service that comes round with hot meals in containers? And then, you can have your wash done at a launderette.'

'They want her to go convalescent,' said Mr Trinder, cutting across these proposals. 'On account of my having to be at the office all day. Sister thinks she oughtn't to be left alone: it might play up her nerves.'

It might indeed, thought Sally. It would send me round the bend, she decided, simply to know I had the foul disease. But she understood that with the Trinders the natural repugnance of the totally healthy had long ago been replaced by a different outlook. They had been for long in a

state of siege: they had grown accustomed to attack, to the loss of ground, to the inexorable nibbling away of their defences. They had forgotten what it was like to be free from pain and fear, so that now only death itself had any power to shock them.

It was clear at last what Mrs Trinder wanted from her. She was to explain to the less understanding the reasons for the Trinders' mild insistence upon having their own way.

'It isn't that we're ungrateful,' said Mr Trinder, again suggesting the argument she could use on his behalf. 'And we're not silly. If there was anyone could come to help us out, we'd have her like a shot. Only there isn't. Mrs Trinder's two sisters are married with families, and I've got only one unmarried brother, living in Wigan. The parents have all gone, both sides. We're getting on, you see.'

'You have no family of your own, have you?' said Sally. She knew the answer, and was in no danger of reviving a wartime tragedy.

'No.' Mr Trinder pursed his lips a little. 'No. We neither of us care overmuch for children. We've never really felt the need. We don't regret it—even now. They can be a great disappointment, and think what an anxiety the war would have been with children.'

Sally, disagreeing profoundly and passionately with every word he said, nodded solemnly.

'I'll see Mr Wakefield for you,' she said. 'And have a word with Sister. I hope Mrs Trinder will not have to be here very long. We can arrange quite a lot of help for her at home, on the lines I've suggested. And of course if you could tell the doctors you had a good neighbour, near at hand, who would do her shopping for her and look in fairly often——'

'I can do the shopping,' said Mr Trinder. 'I've been accustomed to that for the past year. But I see what you mean. Not that Mrs Trinder is likely to be lonely. She's got the wireless and the TV. I've always been out all day, ever since we were married.'

'Yes,' said Sally. She wondered if she could make the

practical, hospital-minded Sister Martin understand the obstinate heroism of this refusal to surrender, this refusal to be panicked out of the humdrum habits of a lifetime of quiet, totally uneventful married contentment, and married affection. Love seemed an exaggerated word to use in connexion with the Trinders. But did she know, she who had failed so signally in love, had she ever known, what she really meant by it?

'I must be going,' said Mr Trinder, suddenly picking up his hat from the floor, and dusting his knees. 'Thank you very much for your kind suggestions. Mrs Trinder will appreciate all you've done for us.'

Sally shook hands with him and let him out by her private door.

'I expect to have her home next week,' Mr Trinder said, as she held the door open for him. 'It's radium they may be using this time, though they aren't certain. The deep X-ray isn't suitable, Sister says. But I don't bother my head to understand what it means. Science is too much to follow, altogether, these days.'

He gave her a gentle smile and was gone.

Sally went back into her room with an ache in her heart, and a renewed sense of rebellion. It was appalling to be so helpless when the need was so fearful. Cancer recurrences always troubled her, but none since her early days had touched her so closely as this case. And yet it was not even particularly unusual.

With an impulse to put her work from her entirely for a few minutes, she sat down at her table and rummaged in one of its drawers for an address book. This was a small flat, red leather affair in which she kept all the odd, semi-professional addresses of individuals, not societies or charitable bodies, who had been, or might one day become, useful to her. Under the letter C she found what she was looking for. 'Hazel Creighton. Flat 2, 54 England's Lane, Hampstead.'

She had often wondered why she had written down Hazel's address when the latter left St Nicholas' Hospital.



She had never wanted it till now. But she must have known that one day she would write to Hazel. All the same it was highly unlikely that she was still at the same address. Probably married years ago; though not, as she had imagined, to Tony.

Still, it was worth trying. Her own readjustment would not be complete, she decided, until she knew what had happened to Hazel. Tony was all right; she might be going to be all right herself. When she knew Hazel's circumstances, she would, finally, be delivered from the past.

She wrote briefly, a little stiffly, as there seemed to be no valid outward purpose in her letter. She attempted a chatty account of her present life, which turned out rather wooden; described Tony's unexpected reappearance in short, objective sentences, and inquired after Hazel's present activities. She ended with best wishes. After all, she had had no real part in the girl's sudden resignation from her job at Wittingham. She had guessed it to be on Tony's account, and guilt oppressed her for this reason, but she had never tried to confirm her personal view.

She posted her letter that evening with a curious sense of satisfaction, as if she had solved a particularly tricky case. She hoped for an answer in a few days' time.

But no answer came. On the other hand, the days and weeks passed, and her own letter did not come back to her.

## *Chapter VII*

THE fate of her letter to Hazel Creighton did not weigh heavily on Sally. She thought of it only at long intervals, and as the weeks passed she decided, very sensibly, that Hazel must have received it, and did not want to renew their acquaintance. This caused her no slightest discomfort. She had never liked the girl. She knew she had written on an impulse, to purge herself of her past conduct, or misconduct, towards her. She decided that she had exaggerated the importance of this, a familiar fault of hers that she recognised. She was ready to forget Hazel; ready and thankful, because now her time, her thoughts, and her heart were filled by Richard Lane.

He, for his part, was astonished at the ease and speed at which their friendship developed. It had only needed one drive into the country on a Saturday afternoon, to carry their relationship beyond the point where he was accustomed, regretfully, to call a halt, and look for the easiest way out. He had explored her mind and her tastes, and he found he wanted to know more of them. She was perhaps the least exciting of all the girls he had imagined he loved. And yet she attracted him more than ever. Already he had idealised her looks and figure. What was worse, he admitted ruefully to himself, they were never absent from his imagination. Though his work did not suffer, for his professional concentration was by now a fixed habit, his leisure was invaded and possessed. His weekly game of golf with his particular friend, John Morley, the anæsthetist, was a fiasco.

‘Do you need a holiday?’ the latter asked, when they had given up looking for a ball that Richard had sliced wildly into the rough. ‘Or are you in love?’

'Both,' answered Richard, shortly.

'Everyone knows who it is,' went on his friend. 'So I needn't ask.'

Richard produced another ball and they continued the game. Later he said tensely, 'Why the devil can't they mind their own business?'

John Morley had forgotten his own remark. He looked blank.

'You said people were talking about Sally and me. Why can't they mind their own business?'

'My dear chap, do they ever?' He paused to hit a perfect approach shot, which landed on the green a few yards from the flag. 'I take it from your general appearance of misery and malaise that it's serious this time?'

'It's hell.'

'Why not go ahead and get a decision?'

'Isn't that obvious? She's scared stiff—poor darling,' he added, under his breath.

'Are you sure of that or merely making a chivalrous and probably quite off-the-mark guess?'

'I know I'm right. And I don't blame her. I've heard the inside story of her complete flop of a marriage. When I think of the way we got the twirp over his trouble I could kick myself. God rot his guts!'

'He did,' said John, irrepressibly. And he added, with admiration, 'You are in a bad way, aren't you? The real M'Coy this time.'

Richard's answer was to smack his ball down the fairway from the next tee.

'Good shot, only I think it's found the far bunker. Will you marry her?'

'Do you think anyone who's been through what she has, would risk a repetition?'

'Isn't it an equal risk to you?'

'God, no!'

'All right,' said John, mildly. 'Go ahead, and good luck to you. It's time you settled down.'

'Yes, uncle.'

John Morley went home to his wife in a mood of resignation. They agreed that Dick ought to know his own mind at thirty-five, and that he ought not to play about any longer. Over Sally they were not so sure. Brenda Morley thought she was too old, John that she was too earnest, and too much wrapped up in her work.

'The fact is,' said Brenda, 'we don't want to lose him as the odd man out, the filler-up of vacant places at parties, the dropper-in of an evening to brighten us up. It's purely selfish. If he wants Saintly Sarah he'll have to have her.'

'Odd how that nickname sticks,' said John, thoughtfully. 'And not quite fair. She's damned good at her job. You wouldn't think to talk to her that she was qualifying for a halo. And she's not a prude by any means.'

'No. I expect you're right,' agreed Brenda. 'Her hair is marvellous, of course.'

John Morley laughed, but he did not disagree with her.

For several weeks now Sally Fulton had kept her Saturday afternoons free in case Richard wanted her to spend them with him. On alternate weeks he was on duty for emergency calls, and they would go to the cinema or to the local repertory theatre. When he was free he would call for her in the Hillman Frances so much admired, and drive her out into the country to some convenient place where they could leave the car and walk on the hills until the evening.

Holmwood being in the Sussex weald the South Downs were a natural objective. Sally began to link her idea of Richard with the springy turf, the gorse-laden air, and the wide views from the top of the range above Firle.

She was a good and tireless walker, Richard found, and her normally trim appearance did not go to pieces on taking exercise or under the assault of the wind. His exact, tidy mind found pleasure in this. If he was to marry, he decided, his wife must have qualities both of mind and body that

would afford a permanent satisfaction. He had no illusions about his present state: it was an obsession, exquisitely painful and disturbing. Through these mists he sought the essential Sally, who would be there when fulfillment had cleared his view. They had begun as colleagues, and continued as friends. When they had passed the heights of passion, it was friendship that would bind them to one another. There was a firm base for them to stand on.

Above all, they were comfortable together. They understood each other's meaning without too much explanation. Sally found his conversation stimulating, and his presence a tremendous relief from the almost wholly female society to which she had been accustomed since she arrived in Holmwood. Her imagination, chilled to immobility by the nightmare constraints of her marriage, began to stir again in the warmth of his encouragement. She found she could make him laugh, and was proud of this ability. But she still held her feelings on a tight rein. Until she was sure, she would not acknowledge even to herself how big a place he now occupied in her heart. She was no longer a girl adventuring in love, and eager to provoke her companion into showing her its mysteries. The advances must all be made by Richard, and she would test them and probe them, aware all the time of the horrifying existence of treachery.

It was his understanding of her inevitable suspicion that held Richard back and at the same time fed the fires of his passion. Another week passed after his round of golf with John Morley, and the tension grew, and an evening came when he fetched John out of his home and took him for a furious walk in the fading light. His pale face and wild manner quite frightened his friend, who was also shocked by such an open display of universal desires.

'Get it over, Dick,' he urged. 'The girl can only refuse you. But I bet she won't. Women would rather be married than single, whatever the circumstances.'

'Sally isn't as crude as that remark suggests,' said Richard, harshly. 'And she goes below the surface—always.'

'What if she does? And anyway, I should have said marriage always goes below the surface—or ought to. And however deep she goes with you, she's likely to find this infatuation, at the moment. I've never seen anything like it.'

Richard turned round without a word and strode off the way they had come. His friend struggled to keep up with him.

'All I meant,' said John Morley, as Richard, still keeping his pale closed face away from his friend, climbed into the driving seat of his car, 'all I meant to say is, for God's sake get it over. You can't stand much more of this: you were the ruddy limit in the theatre this afternoon. Snapping at Sister, cursing that wretched new houseman of yours—what is he, a Pole, or merely a Welshman—I get the accents mixed up—always think the Welsh are foreigners. Anyway, you'll slip up over some tricky bit of work one of these days, if you don't do something about it.'

Richard turned to his friend with a smile that gave John renewed faith in his sanity.

'You're absolutely right. Thanks a lot.'

'Come in for a drink. Brenda'd love to see you.'

'Not tonight. Give her my love. She'll understand.'

And so the next week-end found Richard, more strung up, stern, and pale than ever, this time walking Sally Fulton off her feet along the top of Ditchling Beacon.

The period of their peaceful companionship was over, and they both knew it, and rather ruefully regretted the knowledge. And both, for different reasons, feared and desired the immediate, inevitable future. But Sally kept aloof; she was as determined as ever to bear no responsibility for the crisis that was upon them. Richard must act. If only action did not consist in walking her to death. Already her thighs and calves were aching as she hurried her shorter stride to keep pace with his.

When she could bear it no longer she stopped to admire

the view. Richard, a dozen paces ahead, checked and looked back. He did not speak, only waited for her; and very soon, discouraged by the silence and uncertainty and the loneliness into which his present withdrawal thrust her, she walked on. He fell into step beside her and they moved forward more slowly.

'Have you ever come across a boy called Harry White?' she said, at last.

Her thoughts had moved logically from her own present isolation and fear to the classical case in her experience. But Richard did not know this.

'Harry White? I don't think so. Who is he?'

'Four years ago he had polio,' said Sally. 'He nearly died in the first two days, but they managed to get him to an iron lung in time. He stayed in it for two years. By that time his arms and legs were nearly all right, but he had to have a special breathing apparatus in the day time and go back into the lung at night. Now he can manage without the breathing apparatus for several hours at a time, but he wears it at night.'

'What's all this in aid of?'

He spoke in a friendly tone, but Sally flushed. She had only just realised that she was talking shop, breaking the chief of his taboos. Obstinate she rejected his authority. He had no right to it, unless he chose to establish one.

'He is back at his own home, a farm between Wittingham and Holmwood. We have his second apparatus, at least, Miss Gorley has. If anything goes wrong with the one he uses, he brings it in at once, and takes the other. He doesn't seem to mind. I think I should go completely crackers if I knew an ordinary cold or a fault in the gadget could choke me dead, slowly, in a matter of hours.'

'People who have these things don't think about them. Except just at first. They get used to almost anything.'

'I wonder if they really do. We always say that. Is it to spare ourselves?'

'No. It's nature. A necessary compensation. The other view is purely sentimental.'

He did not often speak to her about his work, or even about medicine in general. When he did, it was usually in this strain. As if he were afraid of finding sentimentality in himself.

'Richard, why do you sometimes talk as if you disliked people?'

'I often do dislike them.'

'Patients?'

'Not only patients. Patients probably less than outside people. We're a very unsatisfactory species, don't you think? Bad-tempered, vindictive, treacherous, self-destructing.'

'I've never looked at it that way. I like people.'

'And you want to help them, work for them, rescue them from their own failings, and greed, and witlessness.'

He spoke bitterly, staring in front of him. Sally, miserably aware that she had started this, tried to recover her ground, but sank deeper in misunderstanding.

'I wanted a job to do with people. Didn't you? Why did you go in for medicine if you don't like people?'

He gave an exasperated laugh that terrified her.

'I went in for medicine because I'm interested in disease, I like using my hands, and above all, because it happens to be a family occupation.'

She knew that generations of Lanes had been doctors and surgeons. It was an explanation of a kind.

'Doesn't it matter to you if they get well or not?'

He stared at her. Of all the idiotic questions.

'Naturally. If I don't have a hundred per cent successes I'm liable to be sued by predatory relatives. Expense of litigation no bar. They can all get the Poor Man's lawyer. Besides, I work for the Government. They're only getting at a type of civil servant.'

'You know it isn't that,' cried Sally, indignantly. 'It's because they think science is so marvellous. If anything goes wrong, it must be the fault of the doctor or the nurse, who didn't use the miraculous powers the right way.'

'Civil servant or witch doctor, I'm liable to be a scape-goat,' said Richard. 'What *are* we talking about?'



'Why we concern ourselves with treating the sick,' said Sally.

'You out of the goodness of your heart, and I because there didn't seem to be anything else.'

'Worth your while,' added Sally, softly.

A half-angry flippant answer came into his mind, but before he said it aloud he saw that Sally had again stopped to look at the view. Or was she looking at the ground? Her hands were in the pockets of her skirt, and her head was stooped a little, giving her a defeated look, that brought him suddenly to his senses.

In a few strides he was near her and as she turned he saw tears on her lashes.

'Oh, Sally,' he said, putting his arms round her. 'Oh, darling, I'm a surly brute. Forgive me.'

Sally was trembling when he had kissed her, but she could meet his eyes now with confidence.

'It was my fault,' she managed to say. 'I know quite well you hate me to talk shop. Of course it bores you: you have it all the week. And so do I, only my department is so much more chatty.'

'So is mine in the operating theatre,' said Richard. 'You'd be surprised.'

'No. I wouldn't. I'd expect it, for morale's sake. How shocked the patients would be, though, if they could see their insides being explored to an accompaniment of wit.'

'They never will. Nor their relations. Let them go on believing in life and death timing, hair-breadth escapes, millimetre margins between the knife blade and eternity. Good for their starved basic emotions.'

'Is that what's the matter with them?'

'Very largely. Life is too secure in these islands. They yearn for hazards. It would do Holmwood a power of good to have a lorry load of cobras emptied in the High Street.'

'Not in this climate. They wouldn't move. They'd just look like a colossal heap of knitting.'

'Too true. Leopards, then.'

'I don't think life is particularly secure,' said Sally,

suddenly grave again. She was thinking of Harry White, in a perpetual state of artificial respiration, and of the Trinders. And also, as Richard's arms went round her again, of the inexplicable breakdown of her first love.

'I want you to marry me,' said Richard, simply. 'I'd like to make that quite clear at the start.'

He did not seem to mind that she could only cling to him and cry, with her face turned against the hard tweed of his coat.

When she had more command of herself, they sat down close together on the sloping turf, facing the hills that rolled towards the sea. She had said nothing yet, but he waited with his usual patience. Her response so far had been a great deal more than he had allowed himself to hope for. If the romantic girl in her had been crushed out of existence, he had found on her awakened lips a mature passion to match his own. It was enough to have told her that his desire would be a life-long need. He did not expect an answer, yet, nor even want one.

He did not kiss her again at once, though Sally would have responded with joy. She was content to live in the moment, loathing the past, desperately afraid of the future, happily bemused, astonished, and rejoicing to find herself loved. In the end it was she who turned to him, lifting an arm to circle his neck, and draw down his face to hers.

After a time they got up and moved on again, hands joined, as if they could not bear to be entirely separate again so soon. They walked for an hour over the springy turf, hardly caring for their direction. They both felt they could walk for ever.

In the end Richard directed their way back to Ditchling and the car. They drove off towards Holmwood, stopping at a small hotel on the way for a leisurely dinner. Sally took a new and exquisite delight in leaving all the choosing to Richard.

'Someone ought to drink our healths,' the waiter said, at the end of the meal, looking her squarely in the eyes.

'Yes,' answered Sally, happily. 'Or we could drink one another's.'

'No. That's not the same thing. An engaged couple is a unit.'

There was a little pause, then Sally said, in a low voice, 'Are we engaged?'

'I want us to be. Don't you?'

Again she was overwhelmed by visions of a dark pit, and a great quick-set thicket, waiting to tear and engulf the unsuspecting traveller. Life was not secure. Total disaster could creep up like a fog at sea, blinding, enveloping, unpredictable, senseless in its impersonal cruelty. Mrs Trinder's cancer; the equally hidden, relentless, rotting away of Tony's love. She could not answer Richard.

But at once she was terrified that he might take her silence for refusal. He had stripped off the sad protection of her loneliness, and there was no retreat.

When she looked up she found his calm, smiling gaze upon her. She forced herself to meet it.

She said simply and truthfully, 'I'm afraid.'

'What of?'

'Afraid of being a failure again.'

'How do you know you were a failure before?'

'Oh, Richard!'

He laid a hand over hers.

'No, Sally. It isn't a bit obvious. You and Fulton were totally unsuited to one another, except professionally.'

'How do you mean?'

'You thought you had a lot in common because you admired one another's work. I'm leaving out the ordinary attractions, and the fact that both of you at that age were probably more in love with love than with one another.'

'I think I was.'

'When you were away from the job you found you bored one another.'

'I bored him. There wasn't anything I could do about it.'

'If he hadn't bored you, you wouldn't have bored him.'

'That sounds very deep, but I don't know if it means anything.'

'If he hadn't bored you, you would have found him

stimulating, you would have shown him how much you enjoyed him, and he couldn't have been bored. Unvarying devotion is insipid without a little salt of flattery. Did you never flatter him?"

'I don't know. I don't think I ever consciously try to flatter people'

'You often say flattering things to me. I get quite puffed out by it.'

'But I admire you so much, Richard.'

'There you are, you see.'

She was warmed, comforted, by his light argument. Probably it meant very little, except that he was blessedly set upon finding excuses for her. She turned to him, smiling, but he saw that the sadness had not gone from her eyes.

'Richard, am I a prig?'

'No, indeed!'

'They think of me like that at the hospital.'

'People these days are all as terrified of being thought good as our grandparents were of being thought sinful.'

'I'm not good.'

'Yes, you are. That's why I shall always want you near me. For other things too, naturally. But above all because you are solid gold right through.'

'Oh dear, that sounds terribly like a suet treacle pudding.'

They both laughed, and Richard did not press her any further. Only when he took her back to her flat, he followed her in, shutting the door behind him. As she was moving away he stopped her and turned her round, with his hands on her shoulders.

'I'm not staying. I only came in to say goodnight.'

He kissed her gently, and again, as before on the downs, her immediate full response released his passion. She was overwhelmed, breathless, exulting, and wholly in love.

'I must go,' he said abruptly, dropping his hands.

She spoke hardly above a whisper.

'I do love you, Richard.'

His hands came up again to frame her face.

'I thought you possibly might. Just go on remembering

that I am not Tony Fulton, and that no one was to blame for that fiasco.'

'No.'

If Richard wanted her to believe that, she would do so.

'I ought to be free between one and two tomorrow. Will you meet me at the Three Birds snack-bar; you know, round the side in Wills Street, for a very quick sandwich, and then we'll go and get a ring. All right?'

'Yes. Oh, yes. I'll marry you, my darling.'

She slept dreamlessly, altogether freed from the past.

And when she reached her desk the next morning she found, among the many letters opened and sorted for her, a few marked 'Private'. One of these bore a Fulham postmark.

She did not recognise the handwriting, but she knew that it came from Hazel Creighton, and in a great revulsion of feeling, a true simple instinctive wish, she snatched it up to tear it across, and throw it away without reading it.

If she had been at the flat she would have done so, but she had written to Hazel on the hospital note-paper, so the reply had come to the office.

Slowly, with the almoner's paper knife, she slit the envelope, and drew out her resurrected guilt and fear.

## Chapter VIII

THE letter fastened upon Sally's ready compassion with the clutch of a drowning man. Hazel Creighton had left Hampstead: the address was in Fulham. She had been away from London for three months, she wrote, or she would certainly have answered Sally's letter before. It had seemed like a miracle, getting a letter from Holmwood. And so unexpected. Just when all her friends seemed to have melted into thin air. But when you were down and out, or ill, you soon found who your real friends were, didn't you? Could she really call Mrs Fulton a friend? Her writing like that, out of the blue, seemed to mean it. If so, and she could spare the time, could they possibly meet on Saturday next, any time after one? She couldn't come to Holmwood, unfortunately, as she hadn't the price of a ticket there and back.

When she had read the letter twice, Sally turned it over on her blotting pad, to hide the sprawling, cautious, desperate demand. Her whole desire was still to tear it up, and bury the pieces in her waste-paper basket. If the letter had not been an answer to her own, she would have done so. *She was very fair in her response to begging approaches, which sometimes could be reasonably satisfied.* She also had a true instinct for the bogus customer, the predatory individual, who saw a natural victim in any public body. Hazel Creighton belonged to neither of these groups. She was a personal problem, self-created, or rather self-revived. The position was of her own, Sally's, creating, and it was utterly false. Moreover she had a shrewd suspicion that Hazel saw it in this light. The conclusion added to her cold fear.

If only she had not bothered to write. She had disregarded

Richard's excellent warning. 'It is dangerous to try to impose your will on events.' She had done so, and fallen into her own trap. She had nothing but foreboding for the outcome.

All the same she did not lose her professional competence. When Miss Brook came into her room a few minutes later, she pushed Hazel's letter to one side, dismissing it from her mind.

'A letter from old Gurney,' said Miss Brook. 'Got in my post by mistake. He's one of your special pets, isn't he?'

This was not how Sally would have described him, but she took no notice. Dora must be allowed her frequent sentimentalities. The envelope was addressed impartially to 'Lady Almoner'. The letter inside began, 'To Lady Fulton Almoner. Dear Madam, well this just to let you know I found my feet allright, and as well as ever I was. Sea air wonderful. You never know I serve two year when a lad, meat cargos, the Argentine. Nothing like sea air, never was. Well, just to let you know I found acomerdation here for when I leave. Single room, ten shiling. Have wrote my son send my things. Wont be no trouble to them, with her wot she is. No fear Hoping you keeping well, Madam, with all you do. Ever grateful thanks. Your truly. (Mr) H. Gurney.'

'Read it,' said Sally, handing back the letter.

Miss Brook frowned as she read.

'Can he do that? Settle down there, I mean.'

'I don't see how we can stop him. Officially the ambulance car would be bringing him back to Holmwood next week. But he is out of the doctors' hands, there, and here too. There is nothing to prevent him drawing his pension wherever he is, nor taking a room.'

'But then he'll go back to exactly the filthy state he was in when he came here.'

'I expect so. In which case someone will turn him out again; either his landlady, or the local welfare officer, or the sanitary department.'

'Oughtn't we to prevent it?'

‘Why? In the cause of respectability?’ Sally saw the distrustful cloud gathering on Miss Brook’s forehead. ‘I’m sorry, Dora,’ she said, smiling. ‘But you know as well as I do these obstinate old people’s bad habits can’t be altered. Whose can, if it comes to that? If they aren’t an actual menace to their own or other people’s health, I think they should be left alone. When they die, their dirtiness goes with them. And the next generation on the whole is much cleaner. The general standard goes up, doesn’t it?’

‘I should hope so,’ said Miss Brook, still not quite sure if Sally was serious. ‘They certainly can afford to be clean these days.’

Sally put Mr Gurney’s letter back in its envelope. There would be repercussions, of course. But the first thing was to find out if the younger Gurneys knew of these plans, and agreed to them. Then she could cancel the ambulance car, and perhaps find out from kind Mrs Smith at Worthing how old Mr Gurney had managed to find his new room. It would not do to have the patients developing a habit of emigrating to the seaside.

‘Would you ask Diana to come in?’ she said to Miss Brook’s retreating figure.

The rest of the morning passed quickly. At one o’clock Sally was in the snack bar at the Three Birds, punctual to the minute. Richard was already there.

It was the first time they had seen each other that morning, as Sally had taken particular care not to be in Hunter Ward when he was likely to be on his round. In the women’s surgical ward, where he had beds, she had escaped him only by diving into the ward kitchen when she heard his voice on the landing outside.

They did not talk much as they ate sandwiches and drank coffee, but their happiness was evident to themselves and to any of the others present who took their noses out of their newspapers to look at them.

‘Finished?’ asked Richard, a little embarrassed by the sentimental expression on the face of the girl behind the counter.



Sally nodded, slipping down from her high stool.

'Then let's get out of here.'

Turning into the less frequented road that ran parallel with the High Street, Richard tucked her hand under his arm.

'We'll leave the car here and walk,' he said. 'It isn't far, and we haven't any choice of shops. Bright's is the only decent jeweller in the town. If you don't see anything you like we'll go to London on Saturday.'

'Oh, I don't think I——' Sally began, and stopped short. Without planning it, or even wanting to do so, she found that she had reserved Saturday for a visit to Hazel Creighton.

'What's that?'

'Never mind. Tell you later.'

At Bright's, the jeweller, there were rings in plenty, for the very good reason that Richard, determined not to fail, had ordered a display in advance. Without any difficulty Sally chose one that pleased them both, and they left the shop with it on her finger.

'Will you mind if I don't wear it in the office this afternoon?' she asked, shyly.

'When will you wear it?'

'Could you tell your friends first?'

'I have told them. I told John Morley, last night. By now it must be right round the hospital.'

Sally flushed. Richard's way was admirable, but it could be direct to the point of discomfort.

'I was going to say I would announce it to my friends, too, but it looks as if that won't be necessary.'

'Have you any close friends at the hospital?'

'In the department? Yes. I've known Dora Brook for years, and I'm very fond of her. And of Peggy May.'

'Perhaps it won't have filtered down to them. Why not wear it and surprise them, anyhow?'

She laughed happily.

'Why not? All right, darling, I'll wear it—till death do us part.'

'Now what put death into your head at such a moment?'

'Not death. The marriage service.'

He did not remind her that this was now out of her reach, since marriage was indissoluble, except by death, in the eyes of the Church. They talked of other things until they reached Richard's car.

'Hop in,' he said, holding the door for her.

'Only as far as the bus stop,' she asked, exerting herself to plead. 'I really mean it.'

When they reached the spot he drew in to the curb obediently.

'Can I come round this evening?'

'Of course. Shall I make dinner for us?'

When the words were out she bit her lip, thinking of the meals she had spoiled when Tony did not come.

'Fine. I eat anything, and quantities of it.'

'You will come? You won't be prevented?'

He understood her.

'If there's an emergency it'll jolly well go to the Registrar. He'll jump at it.'

'Bless you. And thank you again for my lovely ring—and everything. I'm keeping it on, you see.'

She showed him her hand, and he kissed the fingers she held out to him.

When they said goodnight that evening she told him she had to meet an old friend in London the next Saturday. He was not unreasonable, and made plans for Sunday instead. After he had gone Sally wrote a brief note to Hazel announcing her intention. She took it to the pillar box at once, though it would not be collected until the next morning. She had to commit herself to this visit, though her heart still warned her that she was a fool to go.

But, once it was fixed, Sally Fulton had no further thoughts of giving up her visit. Besides, it seemed to be a matter of some urgency to Hazel. Sally's letter drew a postcard from her by return, giving instructions for finding

her new address. She was evidently very eager to renew the acquaintance.

So, on the following Saturday, in the middle of the afternoon, Sally came out of Fulham Broadway station on the District line, and looked about her. Hazel's postcard said turn to the left, so she did so, noticing the Town Hall across the road, and beside her a long row of dingy houses of a not unpleasant design, but uncared for, with blotched stone, and peeling stucco, some untenanted, with boarded or broken panes, and some with grimy curtains hanging in their long front windows.

Consulting her postcard again, Sally walked along in the direction of South Kensington, coming at last to the road named, and turning down it into the warren of mid-Victorian houses that lay between this part of the town and Earl's Court.

The day was warm, but overcast, with no wind. There were a good many people about, and in the narrower streets she passed groups of children playing in the gutters, or dashing up and down the front steps of these once prosperous homes. A coal cart moved slowly just ahead of her. The driver stopped from time to time to get off and lean over arca railings and shout down to unseen customers. But while Sally was following he met with no response.

After a time the cart swung into a side street, and very soon Sally, finding the name on her card, did likewise. When she reached the number she wanted she consulted the card yet once more. Hazel told her to press the bell-push marked Brown. She found it with difficulty, in a double panel of cracked and broken bell-pushes. They were marked in various ways, from a frayed visiting card to a chalk scribble on the adjoining wall with an arrow leading to the board. The name Brown was printed in black ink on a bit of rough wood.

At first there was no response, so Sally tried again. When this too failed she tried the bell-push below the one marked Brown, instead of that above. There was a clatter on

uncarpeted stairs, and Hazel Creighton stood inside the open door.

They stood for a few seconds without speaking, looking at one another. Each found the other changed, but not unrecognisable.

'It is Mrs Fulton, isn't it?' said Hazel, pushing open the door still further. 'Do come up.'

Sally went in, squeezing past two bicycles and a child's pram that stood in the narrow hall.

'I'm afraid I'm right at the top,' said Hazel.

'Won't you lead the way?' Sally answered.

As they mounted she was able to look at Hazel's back as well as at her surroundings.

Both the girl's clothes and the house where she lived cried poverty, neglect, and sluttish unconcern.

Hazel had on a cotton sports shirt that must have been white when she bought it, but was now, from careless, infrequent washing, a dingy yellowish grey. Her skirt of faded blue, with a yellow flower pattern, was torn near the hem; an old unmended tear, with frayed edges. She had bare legs and rubbed black suede flat-heeled shoes. Following so closely behind her, Sally watched the girl's dirty heels slipping in and out of these shoes as she mounted.

The room at the top of the house was small, but not an attic. An effort seemed to have been made to prepare for a visitor, for the furniture was dusted and set in order, and whatever may have been lying about had been cleared away out of sight. Behind the corner curtain, Sally thought, seeing the way it bulged into the room. A kettle, on a gas ring beside an old-fashioned gas fire, was nearing the boil.

'I'll make the tea,' said Hazel, going to a rough-topped table where two pink bakelite cups and saucers stood near a china teapot, with a chipped spout.

Sally chose the less greasy-looking of the two upholstered armchairs and sat down in it carefully.

'That one's all right,' said Hazel casually, 'It's the other one that's liable to fold up on you.'

Sally laughed and took another cautious look round the

room. Besides the collapsing armchair she saw a spindly dressing table, an upright chair, its rush seat hanging underneath it in a bush of torn fibre, and close up against the wall, a wide divan bed, covered with a crumpled black rayon cover. Over the kitchen table where Hazel was filling the teapot a rough wooden shelf, with a row of pans on it, completed the cooking arrangements. There was linoleum on the floor, old, faded, and frayed like the furniture. No rugs, no ornaments; a plain piece of mirror glass fixed to the wall. The whole effect was extremely dreary; disconcertingly so, thought Sally, remembering Hazel's smart appearance in the path lab at St Nicholas, only six years before.

'How long is it since you left Hampstead?' Sally asked, trying to find the least dangerous approach to Hazel's evident decline.

'I was only there a year.'

The girl poured out tea, brought a cup to Sally, and offered her biscuits on a plate. Then she took her own cup to the mantelpiece and stood there, looking down at her visitor.

'I've been all over the place,' she went on, with a vague movement of her hands. Her voice was flat and expressionless, but she seemed to be watching Sally carefully.

'I forget which hospital you went to after you left St Nicholas,' the latter said, cautiously.

Hazel gave a short, bitter laugh.

'I've almost forgotten, myself,' she said, and went no further.

'What are you doing now?'

'At the moment, nothing. Resting, as they say in the theatrical profession. On the dole, to be exact.'

'Oh, I see. Has it been like that for long?'

'I told you in my letter I'd been—away for three months.'

'Yes, you did. But you didn't say exactly when. I—I hope you're better.'

Seeing the blank look in Hazel's eyes, she added, 'I

imagined you'd been ill. My job makes me jump to that conclusion too easily.'

'Then you're still almoning,' said Hazel, nodding her head. 'I thought you must be, from your letter.'

There was a little pause, each waiting for the other to start the next round of questions. Sally, still self-conscious over her new ring, wondered if Hazel had noticed it. At once she reminded herself that Hazel could hardly be expected to remember the rings she had worn six years ago. She did not want to talk about herself, she wanted to find out why Hazel had wanted her to come to this ghastly room. And where she had been for the three months of absence.

'Which hospital were you at before you—went away?' she asked.

'None.' Hazel turned round to pick up the teapot. 'More tea?'

'Please.'

'I was a waitress,' Hazel said, smiling at Sally's uncealed surprise. 'I wanted a change.'

She put down the teapot, and continued with her back to her guest. 'I'm not much hand at sticking to one kind of work. I like change.'

'Many people do,' said Sally, quietly. 'I only thought, with your training——'

'A couple of years at the Poly?' said Hazel scornfully. 'That didn't do me much good.'

'It got you the job at St Nicholas. It could get you a path lain job any time.'

'I suppose so.'

There was a question Sally had to ask.

'Did you leave St Nicholas to have a change?'

Hazel stiffened. For the first time her dark eyes came alive, meeting Sally's in a direct look.

'Don't you know why I left St Nicholas?'

No good, thought Sally. I've got the answer I've always known, and dreaded. No easy way out: no excuse for stopping, here and now, walking out, leaving the obvious waster to her own devices.

'I think I do.'

'Only think?'

'Oh, I suppose I know.'

Of course she knew. She had deliberately taken the keys of the lab to the office. She had deliberately got the girl into trouble with authority. She had deliberately engineered the criticism. It made no difference that Hazel forestalled her dismissal by resigning. No difference at all. Her own guilt remained.

She looked up.

'I told you in my letter I was working at Holmwood. Did I tell you that Tony was sent in there as an emergency? He very nearly died. But he's quite well again now.'

'Tony?—Who?— Oh, your husband! Tony!'

Hazel Creighton's face crumpled unexpectedly. She turned away again, and leaning over the mantelpiece began to cry, noisily, hysterically, but with such obvious sincerity that Sally's heart was wrung by it.

She had been altogether right. Hazel's pursuit of Tony had meant so much to her that, even now, after all these years, with their many bitter disappointments, she broke down to hear his name. Sally's own eyes filled with tears. But she remembered that Hazel knew nothing of the history of her marriage.

'He isn't my husband now,' she said, steadily. 'He—we separated, and later we were divorced, and he is married again.'

Hazel stopped crying; with startling ease. Sally thought, considering that her emotion had been unmistakably genuine.

'I'd never have guessed that,' Hazel said, fumbling for a crumpled handkerchief. 'Marriage wasn't good enough for him, I suppose? Too settled. He'd want a change, too. Or a damned good shake-up at home. You'd be at a disadvantage there. You'd never make him jealous.'

How much better Hazel knew Tony, after her few conversations with him, long ago, than she herself had ever known him. How much better if Hazel had had her chance

with him, Sally admitted to herself, humbly. Aloud she said, anxious now to change the conversation, 'Why did you answer my letter, Hazel? I mean, why did you want me to come up, particularly?'

The girl sat down slowly, in the battered chair opposite Sally's.

'I mean,' the latter went on, doggedly trying to explain her own action. 'I wrote, because seeing Tony again brought that year back to me so vividly. St Nicholas, and the other doctors, and the nurses and everyone.'

'Including little me?' said Hazel, with raised eyebrows.

'Including you.'

'Why, I wonder?'

Sally did not answer this question. She simply sat, looking with anxious, well-wishing eyes, at the girl on the other side of the bare hearth.

Hazel grew restive under this honest gaze. She got up, poured out more tea for herself, sipped it, laid down the cup, and with a sudden violent gesture of both hands, struck the arms of her broken-down chair.

'Because I'm out of work, and in debt. Because I'm all kinds of a bloody fool. Because I must get out of here!' Her voice rose to a shrill, but artificial note. 'Before they carry me out!'

Again the first thought in Sally's mind was disease.

'Is it—is it your lungs?' she asked, gently. 'T.B., I mean?'

Hazel looked surprised, then burst into harsh laughter.

'Good God, no! I'm not ill! There's nothing the matter with me.'

'I thought you said——'

'Never mind what I said. I talk too much.'

She took away Sally's cup to stack it with her own. When her back was turned to her visitor she said, roughly, 'I just thought you might know of a job of some kind. I can't live on the dole. I don't mind what I take—domestic or anything.'

It occurred to Sally then that she did know of a post soon to become vacant at the Holmwood General itself.



'Do you know anything about animals?' she asked. 'I mean, looking after them—in cages.'

'What's this?' Hazel asked, smiling for the first time since Tony's name was mentioned. 'The Zoo, or what?'

'Our little hospital zoo,' said Sally, smiling in her turn. 'The lab animals. I saw the advertisement. Someone to look after them, clean them, feed them, that sort of thing. You know the sort of work they are used for. Tests for some of the diseases, isn't it? And I think the General does some of Holmwood's Public Health work—milk samples and that sort of thing.'

'Rats and mice, rabbits and guinea pigs,' said Hazel. 'Yes, I suppose I do know, if I try to remember. How do I go on?'

'I could send you the advertisement. It was in our local paper. But if you care to apply I could put your name forward. Your lab experience would be useful, even if you haven't done that sort of work lately.'

Hazel considered this.

'Who decides the job?' she asked.

'Oh, some sort of House Committee of the Hospital Board. I don't know exactly. The National Health Service is very complicated and the control is very remote. But our Secretary-Superintendent is on the management committee, and one or two of the specialists, I think. I might be able to help.'

'I've got references,' said Hazel, guardedly.

'Splendid.'

Sally rose to go. It seemed a suitable moment.

'I'll send you the advertisement right away. I know they want someone almost at once. You'd have to live in Holmwood,' she added.

'That wouldn't be a bad idea.'

They went clattering down the bare dark stairs. Sally was thankful to reach the hall. She squeezed past the pram and the bicycles again, then stood against the wall for Hazel to pass her.

Before the latter could unfasten the door, however, it was

opened, and a young man stepped in. He was shorter than Hazel, but a little taller than Sally. He had long straight sandy hair flopping over each ear from a centre parting. He wore dirty corduroy slacks, of a faded bottle-green colour, and a dirty shirt in large red and black checks. Taking no notice of Sally, he pushed in past Hazel, just touching her arm as he passed.

'O.K. to go up?' he asked. His voice was clear and high, with an unexpectedly pure intonation. An actor's voice, perhaps, Sally thought.

'O.K.' Hazel answered, not looking at him.

She held out her hand to Sally.

'Thanks a lot for coming,' she said, and added in a lower key, 'That was Cyril. My boy-friend. He's taking me out tonight.'

'Why not?' answered Sally from the doorstep, smiling and waving goodbye.

## *Chapter IX*

TRAVELLING back to Holmwood on the train that evening, Sally Fulton tried to assess the value of her visit, both to Hazel and herself.

If by her good offices she was able to get the girl the vacant job at the General, would that be doing her a good turn, or merely satisfying her own conscience? She had been tormented ever since Tony's reappearance by this longing for restitution. Had she now achieved it? Because she felt she could not go forward into her new marriage with Richard unless she had indeed paid all the debts of her old life.

She did not deceive herself over Hazel's obvious shortcomings. She must be more incompetent than anyone had thought her to be at St Nicholas. Or perhaps they had seen through her there. Perhaps in her work, though not at that time in her appearance, the essential slattern had revealed herself. The criticism, perhaps, had not all arisen from one act of carelessness and default of duty in failing to go back to the lab when she had not finished her work there. This could have been an excuse for a general review of her incompetence, and in the face of it, knowing its truth, she had thrown in her hand.

If she was right, Sally thought, would not the same thing happen again, and a second failure, a second humiliation, have a worse effect on Hazel than the first? But she reminded herself that it would not be the second, or even the third. Hazel must, by now, be very well used to her 'changes'. The great thing was that she, Sally, had gone to the rescue, with a positive offer, if not of a definite job, at least of real help in getting one. To a girl in Hazel's present position, would not that give real comfort and hope?

She thought so, not with any conceit, but simply and naturally as one whose normal work it was to sustain and cheer.

By the time she reached Holmwood she had settled with her conscience. But she had still to settle with Richard. For his was the only influence she could hope to exert on Hazel's behalf, and he must be told everything, or he would not understand. Everything, at least, about this visit of hers to London and what she had found there.

But she reckoned without his excellent memory.

'Hazel,' he said. 'That's the girl you thought was your rival when you were engaged to Fulton, and promptly squashed like a fly on a window pane.'

'Oh no, Richard!'

'Oh yes, Sally. My darling, that little story of yours was the thing that made me determine to marry you.'

'For an act of ruthlessness?'

'For behaving like a normal woman, capable of passion. It was essential that you should be able to forget, or at least, lay aside, the almoner and all her works.'

'And so?'

He evaded an answer.

'What was the big idea in writing to this girl?'

Sally tried to explain. It did not sound as convincing, said aloud, as it had seemed, unspoken, in her mind.

'Pointless,' said Richard. 'Understandable, but muddled. Also selfish.'

Sally flushed. She began to feel miserable, but felt bound to defend herself.

'Why selfish?'

'You weren't thinking of this girl. If you had you'd have warned yourself off. People don't change. If they grow up telling lies, they'll be liars to the end of their days. If they show useless in their first job, fundamentally useless, I mean, not just unsuited, they'll never make good.'

'Isn't that very sweeping?'

'Isn't it true?'

'No. I don't think it is. Some people take longer than

others to find out what they want to do, and what they can do.'

'In that case they won't have been utterly useless.'

'I think we're talking in such general terms it doesn't mean a thing.'

He grinned.

'How right you are! Let's talk about this particular case, then. She's been in and out of work. She answered your letter because she wanted help, and thought you might be able to give it. Did she say she would like the lab job here? She doesn't sound as if it would be really much in her line.'

Sally had thought of this. She was surprised to remember that Hazel had neither refused nor agreed to follow up the suggestion.

'No. She didn't actually say much. But it was all very vague. I promised to send her the advertisement in the Holmwood Gazette.'

'And did you?'

'I posted it this morning before you came. I always write my private letters on Sunday mornings.'

'Except when you are moved to write them in your office during the week.'

'Brute!'

He laughed and pulled her towards him, and for a time they forgot Hazel and thought only of themselves.

The sunlight, reflected from the sea, flickered on the chalk wall behind them. Above, the chalk cliffs of the Seven Sisters rose three hundred feet to join the blue sky. A few yards away, down the beach, the sea was calm, with small polished waves turning over in gentle succession. They made less noise in their advance than when, retreating, they sucked the pebbles seawards.

Richard and Sally had bathed and dressed again, for though the sun shone, and would burn them if they chose, the wind was cold and the water had been colder. In their rocky recess, almost a cave, where they had made their

temporary encampment, they were pleasantly sheltered by the bulge of the cliff wall, while their recent exertions had warmed their blood. Out at sea a plume of smoke showed where a steamer lay below the horizon, while nearer inshore a white-sailed yacht seemed to be making for Newhaven.

Sally drew away a little from her companion, to sit forward, idly sifting the pebbles from the rough sand.

‘Want to go?’ asked Richard, lazily.

‘No. It’s heaven. I didn’t realise how much I’ve missed Sunday outings.’

‘Holidays didn’t make up for it?’

‘I’ve been spending holidays at home.’

She did not see the look of mingled amusement and pity in his face.

‘Where is home?’

‘North London. Between Mill Hill and Barnet. I remember it as a country place—almost. Now it’s all built over.’

He did not pursue this subject, but after a little pause said evenly, ‘My leave, or holiday, or whatever you like to call it, begins on July 11th, a Saturday. I shall take four weeks then, to keep two in reserve for later in the year, or next spring.’

She looked up at him, waiting.

‘So I thought we might get married on July 11th, which will give us a four-week honeymoon. Where would you like to go?’

‘July 11th?’ Sally’s voice sharpened. ‘That’s only six weeks from now.’

‘Correct. Why “only”? Do you need more than six weeks?’

‘I—I don’t know.’

The idea of being quite definitely committed terrified Sally. She fought her panic.

‘There’s my parent. A rather awkward person to manage as a rule. I had a ghastly time with her over Tony.’

‘You told me——’

‘Did I?’

‘Enough to guess the rest.’

Her heart melted at this understanding. She put her arms round his neck and clung to him desperately.

'Oh Richard, darling, you make it so easy. If you only knew how thankful—— If you only knew——' She was half sobbing as she spoke.

'No. Don't say it. Let the past go. It does stick round your ankles so, doesn't it?'

She laughed feebly.

'I like a snake's skin that won't slough off.'

'I *never* think of you as a snake. Not even one of those lovely green and gold ones.'

'I'm glad of that. About my mother. I did write to her; one of this morning's letters. But she is sure to be angry. It is her first response to anything in the way of a shock. Six weeks scarcely gives her time to get over it, and I should like her to come to our wedding, however quiet.'

'It will be very quiet. Personally I should hate anything else.'

She looked up at him.

'What about your people? Won't they mind it not being a proper wedding?'

'I shouldn't think so. They've had my sisters married in church. And I've no objection to a real slap-up reception, have you? I want my friends to be with us.'

'I should like someone to say a few prayers over us, too,' said Sally, trying to speak lightly, but desperately in earnest.

Again he understood her fully.

'So should I. I'll try to fix it. I know the padre who comes up to the General. I'll have a word with him. He knows all about you.'

'Mr Coleman? He's a dear. I think it's wonderful he finds time to come up to the hospital as often as he does.'

'That's the sort of chap he is. I'll fix him. Registry Office first to make it legal. Church after, to get a blessing on our intention. Relations only, at both these ceremonies. Reception afterwards, to celebrate in the usual manner. I won't be done out of cutting a cake with you.'

She rested her head against his shoulder, gazing out to sea, utterly content.

'I won't tell Mother we've fixed July 11th until she gets used to the main idea,' she said, dreamily. 'After that she'll be enthusiastic, I expect. She loves social occasions, so the reception will give her a big thrill. And she'll be only too thankful to have me settled again. She hated having me back on her hands, as she chose to see it.'

'You're much too independent ever to be on anyone's hands,' said Richard.

'Am I? I don't feel independent. Anyway, I'll ask Mother to come to Holmwood, as the next move. After she's been charmed by you——'

'Can we guarantee that?'

'Yes, we can. And if you don't change your mind, seeing what I might turn into——'

'Look here, is your mother really as frightful as you keep trying to make out?'

'No. But we haven't much in common, and we get on better apart. We don't really approve of one another.'

'Difficult.'

'It used to be. I got hardened to it after Tony went.'

In a sudden access of rage at her grievous injuries, Richard said fiercely, 'Damn Tony! He always crops up.'

'I'm sorry.'

She knew he was not angry with her, but it was her fault, all the same, for reminding him. She began to make plans aloud for the wedding: they decided what presents they would have, and which of their friends would be encouraged to provide them. When they were tired of this game they fell silent, and then Richard took her in his arms. She was released from the last shreds of her separate loneliness and floated in a world where sea and sky and white cliff and golden sunlight and Richard's love were all part of the same awareness, the same ecstasy.

Very slowly the whirling joy spun to a standstill, and the world as she knew it stood on its course again. The waves turned over on the shore, the pebbles dragged, hissing, in.



the backwash, the steamer's smoke was a faint smudge in the distance, the yacht had not quite rounded Seaford Head.

They decided to send out the invitations to the wedding in their joint names, themselves.

'For July 11th?'

'For July 11th.'

'If the path job is fixed by then,' Sally said lazily, 'Hazel could come, too.'

She felt Richard's shoulder stiffen suddenly.

'Damn Hazel!'

He sat up with a violent jerk that nearly threw her against the rock. She saw him collecting their things, the wet towels and bathing dresses, the lunch bag, the thermoses.

'Come on,' he said, holding out his disengaged right hand to her. 'Time we got going.'

Sally was paralysed by her own mortification. For the second time in an hour she had annoyed him with tactless reminders. She must be one of the biggest fools on earth. Even so, there was a difference, in her own mind at least, between Tony and Hazel. As characters in her unfortunate past they could be lumped together, but time was the only factor they had in common. For Tony had moved out of her past into a successful present of his own, whereas Hazel had sunk to a state where she cried aloud for rescue. Sally knew that professionally as well as for personal reasons she was incapable of refusing this call.

'Come on,' said Richard, quietly, still holding out his hand to her. 'Up you get.'

She took the hand, rejoicing in the effortless strength with which it hauled her to her feet. She stooped to straighten her skirt, then said briskly, 'Let me take some of those things.'

'It's all right.'

'Please let me share.'

The hidden anguish came through in her voice, and he looked at her closely; all his momentary anger at the unwanted intrusion of Hazel vanished in a moment.

'I didn't know I had it in me to be so bloody jealous,' he said, smiling faintly. 'But I have. So look out, won't you?'

'Oh, darling, I'm such an idiot.'

'No, you're not. But you might remember to concentrate the loving-kindness. I don't mind you keeping a little store of it in your drawer in the almoner's office, but out of hours I want the lot. So don't forget.'

'No, darling. I'll try not to. You shall have it all. I shall give my month's notice at the General tomorrow.'

'Yes. You ought to give them fair warning. Will they step up Miss Brook or get in fresh blood?'

'Not Dora, I'm afraid. She'll probably leave, too. And Peggy is very uncertain. I do hope the department won't fall to pieces.'

'That sounds rather conceited. Here, you can carry these.'

He gave her the thermos flasks, and changed the bundles into his right hand so that he could put his left arm round her shoulders. In that way they walked slowly back along the beach to Birling Gap, where they had left the car.

Hazel wrote by return of post to say that she had applied for the lab job at the Holmwood General. Sally tore the letter up as soon as she had read it. If Hazel's name came before the committee making the appointment, the medical members of it would have already heard of her. Provided Richard had remembered to mention it, of course. Not otherwise. She, herself, had done all she could. In her secret heart she wished for two things: first, that Richard had done his best for Hazel, and second, that the committee would, nevertheless, turn her down.

She hoped the hospital authority would not delay in advertising her own vacant post. There was work in plenty passing through the almoners' department.

'Wasn't that Mrs Pendleton I saw coming out of the office?' asked Sally, walking beside Peggy May in the direction of the hospital staff canteen.

'You did, indeed.'

'Is the baby still having fits?'

'The baby,' answered Peggy, with a despairing laugh, 'is not, and never has had, fits. But while Mrs P. was seeing Dr Merriman about them for the third or fourth time the second youngest, a boy called Colin, suddenly threw a perfectly genuine, typical, epileptic attack. Mrs P. then said, oh yes, he'd been subject to them from birth, and that was why she worried about the baby.'

'Didn't she worry about Colin when *he* was a baby?'

'Yes, he was under Dr Merriman for a couple of years. After which she stopped coming, because she was expecting the new one. Can you beat it?'

'Frankly, I can't,' said Sally, laughing. 'What did Dr Merriman do?'

'Sent for the old notes on Colin, and admitted him at once, for observation and to get him on to the best treatment. He's wonderful with children, isn't he? He knows these mothers of big families, too. He insists that Colin should go to a special school; a boarding school for physical defectives is what he wants. So that the child will meet heart cases and asthmatics and not only his own kind of disability. Open-air classes, and supervised rests, and medical care laid on.'

'Have you found one?'

'That's the trouble. We don't seem to have half enough of them in the country, and I can't see my way to a vacancy for months.'

'I'll have a look for you this afternoon,' said Sally. 'We had this trouble about a year ago. And then I got on to a private charity; only it isn't in the published book of charities. They found me a place in Devonshire. Oh, nothing hole-in-corner, eccentric, or illegal,' she laughed, seeing the scared look on Peggy May's face. 'All very proper, and above board. Run by a wealthy philanthropist, who hates publicity. There are very few of the type left, and they will soon be extinct. But they are a great blessing at times. So simple; no endless committees, and letters in

triplicate. Let me have the Pendleton papers after lunch, Peggy. If I fail, it'll be a headache for my successor.'

Peggy May looked thoughtful.

'You really are packing up here then when you get married?'

'Yes. Richard wouldn't want me around the place where he works.'

This was a quotation from Richard himself, but Peggy was not to know that. She was impressed.

'I suppose not.'

After a pause she said, 'Will Miss Brook get your job?'

Not on your life, thought Sally. But aloud she asked, 'Is she expecting to?'

'I don't know. It isn't advertised yet, is it? But we shall have to have a third almoner in the department.'

'Exactly. I've only just sent in my resignation. Last week.'

'I see.'

'We're—getting married on July 11th,' said Sally, self-consciously. 'Keep it free.'

Peggy blushed with pleasure.

'Thanks awfully. If Miss Brook doesn't move up I suppose there wouldn't be any chance for me? I mean, I haven't had enough experience to get it over her head, and it might be awkward if by any chance I did, and she stayed on.'

Sally considered this.

'I think she'll stay on,' she said. 'And I think you wouldn't have much chance, yet. Not a long enough experience, as you say. Besides, I thought you were giving up the job to help your mother look after an aunt, wasn't it?'

'I'm not sure,' said Peggy. 'I don't think I really ought to give it up.'

The fact was that she had given her mother no reason to hope she would fall in with her suggestion. And more important still, Hugh Blake had neither written nor come down to Holmwood for over a month. It looked as if this

was breaking up, as the others had done. No fault of hers, and she felt as drawn to him as ever. But if the proposed bondage at home was likely to last, she was going to be very wary of getting caught in it. With marriage in front of her, she could put up with anything for a short time. But with no prospects, she could not bury herself at home indefinitely.

'Oh, good,' said Sally, innocently, looking no further than the younger woman's words. 'I'm so glad. Because you really have got on since you came, Peggy. I think it would be a very great pity to give up so early.'

Later in the week Richard stopped Sally in the front hall of the hospital.

'That girl of yours, Hazel Creighton,' he began. 'I gave her name to the interested parties on the committee. I hope they'll remember it.'

'Oh, thank you,' answered Sally. 'I knew you wouldn't forget, but bless you for it. Even if they don't appoint her.'

Richard walked on, and Sally watched him go, lost in admiration and love, and not caring who saw her in that state.

! But she said no more to Richard about Hazel, either in the hospital or outside it. She was learning fast.

## *Chapter X*

**H**AZEL CREIGHTON was given the vacant lab job at the Holmwood General. There were only two applications for it; hers, and that of an elderly hospital cleaner who thought the work would be lighter in the animal house than in the wards, and who professed herself fond of animals. Her previous service might have secured her the post, had she not ruined her chances with that sentimental phrase. 'Fond of animals' was too dangerous a qualification where the material for tests was concerned. On the other hand, Hazel's previous experience at St Nicholas, though brief, was held to be an advantage. She was able to forward a reference, given when she left that hospital, to the effect that her laboratory work was satisfactory. It was not an enthusiastic reference, and it made no mention of her character. But the lay members of the appointing board, nettled by the scientific members' derisory refusal of the lover of animals, insisted upon making the appointment there and then. Too much time and expense, they said severely, had been spent on finding someone for this very minor post. So Hazel was given the job at four pounds ten shillings a week to start with. If she proved capable of assisting in the actual work on the animals, as well as of feeding them and keeping them clean, her wages would be raised to five pounds ten shillings.

Sally Fulton accepted the good news with resignation. She knew she was responsible for starting the action, and so she was prepared to see it through. She knew that, given the circumstances, she could not have acted otherwise. She hoped that Hazel would settle down at Holmwood, and perhaps work herself back into a junior technician's job.

This fantasy occupied Sally's mind while she found a bed-sitting room for the girl in a house shared by three school-mistresses from the County secondary school.

It was a light, airy room, looking on to a garden. Sally hunted out some gay modern printed cotton material she had bought for herself and never made up; she substituted this for the very drab curtains and bedcover already in the room. She was pleased when she saw the effect it made, and shocked to think of the apathy she had shown in not making use of the stuff before. However, it was just the thing for Hazel's room. It made all the difference. And she would certainly never have used it in the new home she was about to make with Richard. She had bought the stuff to please Tony—as long ago as that—and had laid it aside when she found that pleasing him was impossible. She was glad to be rid of it.

A few days later Hazel arrived, with a small suitcase of luggage and a rather subdued air. Sally met her train. They took a taxi to the new lodgings, where Hazel sat down at once on the divan bed and stared bleakly about her.

'Where do I cook?' she asked at length.

'There's a small kitchen the others said you could share. You'll have your main meal at the hospital, I expect. That's what I do. It'll only be breakfast and supper.'

'I don't eat breakfast.'

'You must have something before you go to work!'

'A cup of tea. I'll need a gas ring. For that, and something in the evening. Pity it's an electric fire. I suppose I could get an electric kettle.'

'I could lend you one. I think,' said Sally. 'But I'm sure they won't mind you sharing the kitchen.'

Hazel smiled and thanked her, and Sally went away, vaguely uneasy, to her afternoon's work at the hospital. Her duty was discharged. Hazel had arrived, looking clean and smart in a cheap suit, nylon stockings, high-heeled court shoes, and a transparent pale blue nylon blouse. But she had not been very enthusiastic about her new start. When, in the taxi, Sally had offered to stop at the hospital on the way, to

introduce her privately to her future boss, who might still be in the lab, though it was lunch time, she had refused. Time enough for that, she said, when she clocked in the next morning. Sally concluded that she must be tired after her journey, and perhaps afraid of her future.

But after her benefactress had left the schoolmistresses' house, Hazel Creighton came suddenly alive. She went quickly to the door of her room, opened it, and listened intently. Then she made her way rapidly and thoroughly through all the rooms of the house. On the ground floor there was a communal sitting-room and a kitchen. The three owners of the house each had a bed-sitting room, one on the ground floor, the other two above, each furnished and decorated according to their individual tastes, but all looking remarkably alike in style, if not in colouring. Hazel's lip curled scornfully as she looked round each room in turn. She opened wardrobes and cupboards, inspecting but not touching the contents. All the time she was alert for the sound of a key in the front door below.

The schoolmistresses arrived to find their new lodger standing quietly in the kitchen watching a kettle that was coming to the boil.

'Oh, good,' one of them said, when they had introduced themselves. 'Mrs Fulton brought you along all right. We gave her a key because we would be out. Did she leave it with you? I'm so glad you've found your way about the house.'

'Can you tell me where I can buy a loaf?' asked Hazel, meekly.

'There's a baker and confectioner round the corner of this street, in a little block of shops. Milk next door, and butcher beyond. Grocer opposite. All very friendly. Say we sent you.'

'Thank you,' said Hazel. She picked up her bag from the kitchen table.

'Are you going at once? What about your kettle?'

'I put it on for you, really. I'll do another when I come back.'



The three women looked at one another with pleased faces. Hazel left them standing round the stove.

But as she reached the front door one of them caught her up, holding out some coins, and saying, 'Can you buy us some doughnuts, please? Three will do.'

She gave Hazel the money and went back into the kitchen.

'Nice-looking girl, isn't she?' she said, cheerfully. 'She didn't mind running errands a bit.'

One of the others said, 'I thought we had some doughnuts left over from yesterday.'

The third said, 'I don't remember. There aren't any in the tin, are there?'

And the one who had gone after Hazel repeated, 'A very nice-looking girl, I think.'

At the baker's shop Hazel bought a small loaf, three doughnuts and a bath bun. She did not feel like eating any more doughnuts that afternoon.

Sally Fulton decided the next morning that it would not be tactful or fitting to visit Hazel at the lab during working hours. It was possible they might meet at the canteen at lunch time, though she was not sure if Hazel counted as technical and auxiliary staff, or as domestic. The latter had a separate canteen to themselves, since their hours of work were different.

In any case Sally would not have had time for anything outside her own work that day. Her programme, a fairly dull one, had been grievously upset by a surprise visit from old Mr Gurney's daughter-in-law.

'And I should like to know who put him up to staying on at Worthing?' she asked belligerently, as soon as she was seated opposite Sally.

'I don't think anyone did,' the latter answered, mildly. 'He wrote to me as if it was entirely his own idea.'

'An old man like that?' pursued Mrs Gurney. 'They don't have ideas. He's senile.'

'I don't think so, if you mean that his mind is affected by age.'

'Isn't the mind always affected?' said Mrs Gurney, with scorn. 'I've never heard of an old person that wasn't a bit silly in the head. She must have put him up to it. Got a rake-off from the party that's took him; I shouldn't wonder.'

Sally began to feel a just impatience, but she was used to suspicious relatives.

'We shan't get anywhere by accusing people,' she said, with a new show of authority that made her visitor stiffen in her chair. 'Mr Gurney has made arrangements that he thinks will suit him better than coming back to Holmwood to live with his son—and you,' she remembered to add.

'He's got no business to do any such thing.'

Sally looked at Mrs Gurney with a puzzled air.

'But I thought you resented the idea of having him to live with you? I thought you tried to find somewhere else for him?'

'Here in Holmwood, I did. But what'll the neighbours say now they know he's gone behind our backs like this, the cunning old devil?'

Sally handed her the letter she had been looking for in her files.

'Perhaps you would like to see what he wrote to me,' she said, evenly. 'I think it explains everything.'

Mrs Gurney read slowly, and her face darkened as she gradually absorbed the sense of it.

'If that's how he feels,' she said, handing back the letter, 'good luck to him, and good riddance! They won't put up with him for long, and catch me making another offer. No fear!'

She rose to her feet. She was sweating in her rage and mortification, and large damp patches had appeared under her arms, defacing the flowered rayon dress she had put on to visit the Lady Almoner.

'I hope your husband has sent him down his belongings,' said Sally, also getting to her feet.

'Ran them down in the car last Saturday,' said Mrs

Gurney. 'Post Office savings book and all. I wasn't going, I told him. I wouldn't demean myself, talking to those sharks wot's got hold of 'im.'

So that was it, thought Sally, as she watched Mr Gurney's daughter-in-law making her indignant way along the corridor. She had become reconciled at last to having the old man because she expected to take rent for his room and money for his keep out of his pension or his savings. And now both were denied her. Gone were the finer feelings and the social aspiration, replaced by a peasant's avarice.

Old Mr Gurney was well out of it, Sally decided. She hoped he would not outlive his welcome in his new home at Worthing, but would enjoy the summer by the sea and end his days with the sound of it in his ears.

Richard Lane had decided, very wisely, to take no interest whatever in Sally's protégée, once the latter was appointed to the post Sally wanted her to get. Nevertheless he was curious. He had not decided how much Sally's interest was due to her distorted sense of guilt and how much to the girl's own power of forcing her need upon her. This he could not discover without seeing Hazel, but he still avoided making any attempt to do so. His curiosity, however, remained, increased by the fact that Sally never spoke of Hazel now, and seemed to have lost all interest in her.

So it was unfortunate that the assistant pathologist, rather amused than disturbed, stopped Richard one day on his way to the operating theatre to ask him why he had planted such an obvious popsy in such unsuitable surroundings. His manner suggested, guardedly, that Richard must have some ulterior motive.

'You seem to forget I'm engaged,' said Richard, smiling. Paul Brandon nodded his head solemnly.

'Moreover,' said Richard, determined to nip scandal in the bud, 'it was Sally who asked me to do what I could for the girl. Is she any good?'

'At the job nature intended, I should think first-class,' answered Paul. 'For looking after animals, well, she gets by, but it obviously isn't right for her. She's too intelligent for one thing. In fact, now we know she's had a certain amount of training, we're letting her take over some of the routine.'

'Such as?'

Paul Brandon laughed self-consciously.

'She's a lot better at cutting sections than I am.'

'Does Wheelhouse approve?'

Dr Wheelhouse, the senior pathologist in charge of the laboratory, was an excellent scientist, but almost unapproachable as a human being.

'He hasn't made any objection so far.'

'Probably hasn't even noticed the fair Hazel.'

'She isn't fair. Dark. Pale face. Blue eyes. Tragic expression. A real knock-out: haven't you noticed it yourself?'

'I've never seen her.'

The junior pathologist stared at him.

'You can't mean that.'

'Why not? I told you, Sally wanted me to speak for her if I could. Which I did. That's absolutely all there is to it as far as I'm concerned.'

'You don't know what you've missed.'

Richard went on his way. Paul Brandon's enthusiasms were well known, but it was odd, with all his experience, that he should have so praised this girl. There must be quite a lot in her that did not appear from Sally's account. He had thought of her as an untidy unattractive failure, who must be given a last chance to make good, because Sally wanted it, and always fought for the grain of good in people, bless her, though she was never sentimentally blind to their faults. But there was no glamour in Sally's description of Hazel. She had missed all those things that were easily apparent to Paul Brandon, perhaps because she was a woman herself. Or had she covered up on purpose, remembering Tony Fulton's passing interest? The thought recurred to him several times in the course of the next few days. He determined to settle it for himself.

It was again unfortunate that his first meeting with Hazel was not an occasion of his own seeking, which would have been carefully arranged with the maximum discretion. But it was disastrous that Sally, quite by accident, was a witness of it.

She was passing the lab in the ordinary course of her going to and fro about the hospital. Just as she had been at St Nicholas, when she was engaged to Tony. And as on those former occasions, there was Hazel at the lab door, and there was Richard, with his back to her, and Hazel smiling down at him from the steps.

Only the sequel was quite different. Richard must have noticed Hazel's look of recognition, for he wheeled round, and when he saw Sally standing frozen on the path a few yards away, he left the lab, without even a word of good-bye to Hazel, and joined her, laying a hand on her arm to lead her away with him.

'Don't let me interrupt,' said Sally, stiffly.

He laughed.

'You didn't. Except to rescue me. I wanted to see Paul.'

'Dr Brandon?'

'Yes. But he wasn't there. No one was there, except your protégée.'

'I wish you wouldn't keep on calling her that. It sounds so affected for one thing.'

'We haven't got a comparable word in English. Anyway, the lab was deserted except for her. And I'll tell you something. She wasn't in the animal house, though it could have done with a bit of attention. It stank worse than I've ever known it.'

'Where was she?'

'Rootling in a drawer in Paul's bench, as far as I could see. She whipped round the second I got inside. As he wasn't there, I started to come away, but she followed. Hence the conversation.'

'It isn't my business,' said Sally, trying to sound indifferent, 'who you talk to at the hospital.'

'But you were seized by pangs of jealousy, weren't you?'

His hand was warm on her arm, and his eyes were on hers, laughing at her, loving her. It was impossible to be angry with him. Besides, it would be unfair; she believed him without reserve.

'You are an all-seeing beast. Yes, it came over me again. It was so like—so like——'

'I know. I saw the whole thing in that girl's face.'

'That was how you knew I was behind you?'

'Yes.'

Tony had never known, or if he had, he had not cared. So this was different, utterly, blessedly, different.

He kissed her, in a corner between two blocks of wards, before they parted to go their several ways. He was not curious about Hazel any longer. He had her measure and it did not amount to much. But he felt vaguely uneasy on Paul Brandon's behalf. And then he reminded himself that Paul was perfectly competent to manage his own affairs: after all, he had had plenty of practice. And he was unlikely to be serious. He had not looked or spoken seriously; Richard had never yet known him to be serious over a girl. Unlike himself, who had always aimed at marriage, Paul was determined to escape such dangerous ties. Richard was more than willing to put the Hazel Creighton case completely out of his mind.

But with Sally, the trivial scene had the opposite effect. With her bias to self-condemnation she could not let matters rest. The truth was that since she neither liked nor trusted Hazel, she was determined, with a perversity she never showed in her professional dealings, to prove herself wrong. So she made a special point of going back to the lab before the end of the afternoon, and found Hazel listlessly sweeping the floor of the animal room.

There was very little smell there now, Sally decided. From the wisps of straw sticking through the bars of the cages, she judged that they had been cleaned out very recently. Hazel must have worked hard to get all this done in one afternoon.

'Hullo,' she said. 'I hadn't time to stop this morning.'  
'You didn't get a chance,' said Hazel, with a faint smile.  
Sally blushed.

'Richard—Mr Lane—and I are getting married in July,'  
she said.

'I know. It was one of the first things I heard in this place.'

The conversation died. Hazel, moving the long broom without much skill, tried to sweep her collection of bits into a dustpan, without stooping to hold the latter. She was not at all successful.

'Do you like it here?' asked Sally. 'Is it—the job, I mean, quite interesting?'

Hazel's back was turned to her questioner; she stooped to lift the dustpan, letting some of its contents sprinkle back on to the floor.

'Not too bad.'

'And your digs?'

'Ditto.'

'I hope you aren't bored in your free time. If you are, I wish you'd pay me a visit sometime. I'll give you my address.'

She found a scrap of paper to write it down for Hazel, propping it on the top of a cage, where half a dozen mice lifted their twitching noses towards the sound of her pencil over their heads.

'You won't want me round,' said Hazel. 'Isn't he always there?'

'Not when he's called back to the hospital. You could give me a ring first, if you'd rather.'

Hazel smiled again: it was clear she would do no such thing.

'Look,' said Sally, desperately. 'Why not come with us for a run on Saturday afternoon? We nearly always go into the country at the week-end, Saturday or Sunday. Sometimes both.'

'I go home at week-ends,' said Hazel.

'Home?'

'To my flat. You know. Where you came.'

To call that place 'home', Sally thought, in shocked disgust. And she had imagined she was setting up the girl in a new life.

'Do you have to go to London early?' Sally asked. 'Why not come for a run and we can put you off at the station on the way back.'

'I hitch as a rule,' answered Hazel. 'I can't afford the fare.'

This seemed reasonable on her wages, but Sally could not understand why she kept the London room. It must be a great expense for no apparent gain. And then she remembered the young man who had arrived at the house as she was leaving. The boy-friend. He must be the reason.

'Do come,' she urged. 'Next Saturday, if you haven't got anything else on.'

'All right,' said Hazel. 'I'd like to meet your fiancé properly. He's very well thought of here, isn't he?'

Sally had no wish to discuss Richard with the girl, so she made some excuse and left her. After the Saturday outing, she argued with herself, all her obligations to Hazel would have been met. If only Richard would not be angry with her for what she had done.

Richard was angry: very angry. But he was wise enough not to show it. Instead he agreed that Hazel's life in Holmwood might be pretty dull, and he thought out a drive, including a walk on the North Downs this time, at the end of which he would deposit Hazel on the London road before driving off somewhere else with Sally.

But the next day he added Paul Brandon to the party. The latter was surprised, curious, and not at all averse to sitting on the back seat with Hazel.

He was a little damped, however, to hear that the girl would leave them, early in the evening, to go to London. He guessed the probable reason before Richard confirmed it.



'We suspect a boy-friend,' explained Richard. 'A type did turn up when Sally was leaving her London digs. A fairly scruffy type, she says.'

'That would be possible.'

Richard looked keenly at Paul, but the latter had spoken quietly, with no hint of irony, only a gentle tone of regret. Again he hoped that Paul was following his usual practice; at any rate, his eyes seemed to be wide open.

As might have been expected, the drive was not a conspicuous success. Sally was nervous, Richard was bored, Paul was frustrated, and Hazel hardly seemed to be present. It was with relief all round that she got down, at last, on the London road, carrying a small bucket bag, overflowing with make-up jars and bottles, and apparently nothing else.

'It seems funny to leave you like this,' said Sally, feebly.

'I'm all right.'

'See you in the lab on Monday,' shouted Paul, as they moved off.

She looked at them with her strange blank blue eyes, and half raised her hand.

'I need a drink,' said Richard. 'Several, to be exact.'

## *Chapter XI*

ON the following Monday Richard led Paul Brandon aside after they had finished lunch in the medical staff dining-room.

'I'm sorry about Saturday afternoon,' he said.

'It was a bit off,' agreed Paul, smiling.

'Sally thought she was doing the girl a good turn. I don't think it worked out that way.'

Paul shook his head, grinning broadly now.

'Did she turn up all right this morning?' Richard went on, determined to give the whole incident decent burial. •

'She turned up,' answered Paul, 'looking like death. Boy-friend overdoing it, I imagine.'

'You may be right,' said Richard.

He was pleased to find that Paul took this cynical attitude to the girl. If it was the result of the Saturday drive, then that melancholy occasion had not been such a dead loss after all. In confirmation of his thoughts he heard Paul murmur, 'She seems to be a bit of a waif. You can't tell at first if silence and speaking looks mean they're deep or just wanting. Or something else.'

'Hazel isn't wanting, is she? I thought she had her wits about her, very definitely.'

'That isn't quite what I meant. I was speaking of feelings, not intellect.'

'I see. Not dim wits—just insensitive?'

'No. At sea. All abroad. Lost.'

This was not so good.

'Are you getting sentimental over her? That would be worse than Sally's unofficial almoning.'

Paul shook his head.

'Don't worry. Miss Creighton in a post-week-end hangover

is not a case for sympathy. Doesn't even fish for it. I'll give her that.'

They parted, with Richard reassured as far as Paul Brandon was concerned. He wished he could feel the same about Sally. In some queer way she seemed to have identified herself with this girl. Hazel's welfare and Hazel's future concerned her personally in a way he neither understood nor trusted. He could see no reason for any kind of tie between them, and he felt sure that it existed only on Sally's side, in her imagination. The girl had not bothered to hide her astonished boredom at finding herself moving through the English countryside with three comparative strangers. In his judgment she was completely self-centred, and self-seeking. Her failures must be of her own making, he decided. Unfortunately this was not a view that Sally would accept easily. So he had to look forward to more of these unrewarding encounters with the new lab assistant.

The prospect was not a pleasing one, but in spite of his just irritation, he knew that he was stimulated, even amused by it. Here was what he had always missed. All those attractive, loving girls, whose entire surrender at last had never failed to bore him. Sally would never bore him, because he would battle for complete possession of her to the end of his days, and would always, blissfully, be denied it. Her obsessive conscience, her unassailable principles, would eternally thwart, and endlessly stimulate, their passion.

Passion. That was the heart of it. Sally was capable of passion. He found it on her lips, and watched it, sublimated, in her endless devotion to others. He had understood its baser, touching, compensating outbursts in her occasional jealousy, and even in the persistence of her nagging self-criticism.

In the meantime, he decided, dropping swiftly down the high sweep of his thoughts, Hazel was a god-damned nuisance.

Mrs Trinder died quite suddenly in the ward one afternoon, just as the tea was going round.

It was during her second visit to Lister Ward since the

recurrence of her cancer had been established. On the first occasion she had stayed in a week for various tests, and had then gone home, as she wished to be with her husband for the short time that was left to them. No special treatment had been given. But her symptoms had taken a new and painful turn, and as her misery increased Mr Trinder found it unbearable to witness. So she had been re-admitted and Mr Wakefield had introduced some local radium treatment in an attempt to relieve her. She was feeling very hopeful about this when she died.

The nurse had just handed Mrs Trinder a cup of tea and two biscuits on a plate, and the latter had just picked the cup off the saucer, when she gave a little cry, and sank back against her pillows. The cup fell on the bed and the tea poured down on to the floor.

The nurses rushed to help her, and while one of them pulled her pillows away to lay her flat in the bed, the other quickly drew the curtains of her cubicle round her, and hurried off to find Sister.

Sister Martin felt the pulse and sent an urgent message to Mr Wakefield, who had only left the ward after his round about fifteen minutes before. But by the time the gynæcologist arrived Mrs Trinder's laboured breathing had stopped and she was dead.

'Embolus, I expect,' said Mr Wakefield, when he had finished his examination. 'Best thing that could have happened to her, poor woman.'

Sister Martin agreed, but when the surgeon had gone she stood looking down at the effigy of Mrs Trinder, wondering if he was right. It was not what the dead woman would have chosen. She was reconciled to death, but she had wanted passionately to be with her husband when it happened. This had been denied her. Only his grief at her suffering had sent her back into hospital. It was to relieve his pain, not hers, that she had agreed to come. He knew this, poor man, and now the knowledge would burn him for ever.

'Tell Evans, Nurse,' Sister Martin ordered. 'We must get her moved. This will be a bad shock to the other patients.'

They weren't prepared. Is Mrs Armstrong all right? She must have seen it all. Get Nurse Bates to stay with her for a bit, and then go for Evans. I must get on to Mr Trinder.'

She drew the sheet up over Mrs Trinder's face, and then went to her desk with a load on her heart. Every time this sort of thing happened she hated it more. Especially talking to the relations. It would be very bad when Mr Trinder came. It was, perhaps, worse to have to ring him up at his office. She prayed that he would not answer the telephone himself, but that someone responsible would take the message and break it to him gently. But when the call went through and it was Mr Trinder himself at the other end, prepared, miraculously calm, putting the difficult words into her mouth for her, Sister Martin was able to say quite simply and steadily what had happened. Afterwards she sat on at her desk, wiping her eyes, until she remembered the work she still had to do, and went back into the ward.

Sally did not see Mr Trinder until the next morning, though she heard of the sudden death of his wife from Evans, on her way out of the hospital on the same evening.

The news, coming at the end of a particularly trying day, depressed her, though she could not help thinking, with Mr Wakefield, that the sick woman had been granted an easy way out of her suffering. All the same she was reminded yet once more of the precarious state of human life, and all her little efforts that day to make things easier for newly recovered patients seemed irrelevant and trivial. But then it had been a particularly trying day.

To begin with there was Mr Willis. He had been up to see Miss Gorley about an improved type of apparatus for his colostomy. The first one had not been satisfactory, but whether this was from his own inability to learn, or from some defect in the appliance, it was difficult to determine.

After he had taken his new gadget from Miss Gorley he asked to see the Lady Almoner. Sally was free at the time, so she had him shown into her office.

Mr Willis sat down, breathing noisily, with his brown paper parcel balanced on his knee.

'You're looking very well,' said Sally, in an encouraging voice. 'Much better than when we sent you convalescent.'

'I'm all right,' said Mr Gorley, without enthusiasm. 'If it wasn't for this business.'

He patted the brown paper parcel, not meeting Sally's eyes.

'I know. But isn't it—settling down?'

'Not as much as I hoped. Miss Gorley says I'll be able to manage better now. But I dunno.'

He gave her a miserable glance and looked away again.

'It always takes time to get used to it,' said Sally, gently.

'That's what the doctors say. And I'm not to see them again for two months. Sister said the same. But then she's a proper tartar, is Sister Collett. You know what she's like.'

'She's a wonderful nurse,' said Sally, warmly. 'Simply marvellous. The surgeons all say they couldn't get on without her.'

'Callous, though, if you know what I mean,' persisted Mr Willis. 'You ask the patients. Rides roughshod. I seen it, over and over again. You don't get no sympathy, there, I can tell you.'

'You wanted to see me about this apparatus,' said Sally, firmly.

'It's the diet that does it,' said Mr Willis, whose outburst on the subject of Sister Collett seemed to have given him confidence. 'When I was at the convalescent home they gave me just what I got in here. It was champion. But now I'm home I can't get the right food.'

'Why not? Surely your wife understands how important diet is in your case?'

'Mrs Willis isn't there at present,' answered her husband bitterly. 'Gone to her sister's. Taken the kids with her. She never could abide illness, and this thing was getting on her nerves.'

'Oh, dear,' Sally began, but he interrupted her.

'Not that I'm not better off without her,' he said. 'She

never was much of a cook. Shouldn't wonder if that started all this in the first place.'

Sally privately agreed with this view, but she was too discreet to tell him so.

'I've got my niece there now,' said Mr Willis. 'She wants to do her best, but Mrs Willis lost the diet sheet I give her and we can't lay our hands on it. I wondered if you could help me.'

'Why yes,' said Sally. 'You can get copies from Sister Collett.'

'That's just it,' answered Willis.

'But she'll be very pleased to see how well you are. I expect you could go up to the ward straight away. Shall I ring through for you?'

Mr Willis thought this might break the ice with Sister, or at any rate give him enough courage to face her. Sally got through to Hunter Ward. The nurse who answered her call was hesitant at first; Sister was doing a dressing, she said, and would not like to be disturbed. But she consented to take a message, and presently Sally heard that Willis might go up to Hunter, and could wait in Sister's room until she was free.

With a martyred expression Mr Willis prepared to meet this ordeal. Sally watched his slow departure with mixed feelings. When he had gone she opened her window a little wider, and leaned out to breathe the untainted air of the hospital garden. What sad afflictions these people had to bear. Sad and sordid. Mrs Willis was a coward and a deserter, and cruel besides, but she had a case. She certainly had a case.

While Sally was still leaning out of the window Miss Brook knocked at the door and came in.

'Oh, hullo, Dora,' said Sally, going back to her desk.

'It's about Molly Mahon,' cried Miss Brook, indignation in every word. 'Do you remember?'

Sally nodded.

'The Irish girl we thought was in the baby racket.'

'Yes. Only then I found she'd been in another job in

England, which she didn't disclose when she applied to come here. She said she was too ashamed and too frightened. She swore she'd been raped by a Polish ward orderly.'

'I think you told me a week or two ago,' said Sally. 'But I thought that was rather a tall story, even for a Celt.'

'It went down with the obstetric registrar,' said Miss Brook, grimly. 'I sent her to his ante-natal clinic, of course. And would you believe it, she played up the mental agony side to the extent that he referred her to Mr Wakefield for justifiable abortion on the grounds of suicidal intention.'

'The absolutely legal and fool-proof racket,' said Sally, nodding her head. 'Don't tell me Mr Wakefield fell for it?'

'But he did,' said Miss Brook. 'I really don't understand men.'

No, thought Sally, you never have, my poor dear, and you never will. But she remembered her own failings in this respect, and brought her wandering thoughts back to the Mahon girl.

'Then the business is settled, isn't it?' she asked, hopefully. 'When are they getting her in? Isn't it rather late?'

'Fifth month,' said Miss Brook. 'Yes, much too late, I should have thought.'

'They'll leave it a bit longer and then induce, I expect,' said Sally. She knew the various proceedings for heart cases and tuberculosis and kidney trouble. All the strange complications of the most natural event in life had come her way at one time or another. 'In any case, she's got away with it. And there'll be one less unwanted infant in the world.'

Miss Brook exploded.

'That's just it! No sooner all settled than the whole thing's off!'

'What do you mean?'

'Her religion! As if she had any! The little nit-wit has to blurt it all out at confession——'

'That's rather the point of confession,' Sally could not help suggesting.

'And Father Bourne was up here this morning, practically abducting the wretched girl.'



'Oh, surely?' protested Sally.

'Yes, he was. She's not to get rid of it, rape or no rape. She's to leave here at the end of this week and go into one of their convent homes to have it. They'll make her look after it for three months and then take it back to Ireland. What sort of future can she expect in a small village over there, saddled with a child?'

'She needn't go back. She can stay in England and get another job.'

'You should have heard Father Bourne. We might be an agency of the devil here, not an almoners' establishment.'

Sally was silent. There seemed to be no more they could do.

Later in the day she came across Father Bourne himself. He had been visiting one of the Catholic patients. When she saw him Sally smiled a greeting and walked on more quickly. But Father Bourne easily caught her up.

'I am glad to see you,' he said. 'I am afraid I have upset Miss Brook.'

'Well, yes,' said Sally. 'She is upset. Doubly so, really. Because she has been thoroughly scandalised by Molly Mahon's behaviour throughout.'

She did not go into details, since he must know them all by now. But she added stiffly, 'We found it difficult to decide which of the girl's various stories about herself is true, if any.'

'I am sorry you have been upset,' said Father Bourne gently. 'I have a very great respect for all you do here. Perhaps another time, with one of our people, I could help you earlier on.'

This mild rebuke, and its statement of authority, hardened Sally's opposition.

'We are accustomed to dealing with cases on our own lines,' she said. 'And on their own merits.'

'But Miss Mahon is a Catholic.'

'Does that mean that you own her body as well as her soul?'

Father Bourne sighed deeply.

'I'm sorry,' said Sally. 'I ought not to have said that. I

don't really want to start a religious argument. What will happen to her?"

"We shall look after her and I hope very much that she will marry the baby's father. If that can be arranged before the birth so much the better."

"You wouldn't force her into marrying a man, a foreigner, who had——"

"The baby's father is not a foreigner," said Father Bourne.

"So the Pole was a myth?"

"No," said Father Bourne.

"But the story about him was a lie. I thought it must be. Does she ever speak the truth?"

"People seldom do when they are frightened," said the priest. "But there are occasions when they are frightened not to speak the truth."

"You mean, at confession?"

He did not answer her question, but went on, "I am telling you about her because she will tell it herself now. She will tell Miss Brook and Mr Wakefield. And she will apologise for giving so much trouble. I hope very much that she will find her way in the end."

"How do you know this man will marry her?"

"I do not know. But I am hopeful. I have written to the priest in his village, at Miss Mahon's request. The man has a good position there, and he is unmarried. He could support her."

"But is he fond of her any longer? Or she of him?"

"Those are sentimental considerations. If they marry, with what is behind them, and the child to look after, there are no obstacles to happiness. But that is not the point. It is his plain duty to marry her."

"And he won't want to lose his good position," said Sally. "So it may work. I think that's wonderful—and terrifying."

"I think chaos and anarchy are even more terrifying," said Father Bourne.

They parted amicably, but Sally's Protestant soul was thoroughly shaken. Power, she decided, love of power, the application of power. That was at the root of his conduct.

It would have needed a great imaginative effort to apply this reasoning to herself.

Sally was still smarting from what she felt was a total defeat when Mr Trinder was shown into her office the next morning. Immediately her heart was torn by the fixed white mask that stared at her.

'I haven't really come for anything,' said Mr Trinder. 'There isn't anything to be done now. But they've told me to stay away from my office for a few days, so I thought I'd take the opportunity to look in and thank you for all you did.'

'It's what we're here for,' answered Sally. 'I only wish——' She changed her mind about expressing what she wished, and finished, 'Mrs Trinder was very brave. We all admired her.'

'That's just what Mr Wakefield said,' Mr Trinder went on. 'His very words. So I mustn't let her down now, must I?'

'No,' said Sally, hoping there was no sinister implication in these words.

Mr Trinder rose to his feet, and putting his hand in his pocket brought out a packet of one pound notes. He counted out five of these, and pushed them towards Sally.

'I'd like to make this small donation to the Cancer Research Fund,' he said. 'In memory of my wife and how she was taken. And in the hopes they may find out a cure in time, though too late to save her.'

'I'll send it on,' said Sally. 'I'm sure they will be most grateful.'

She held out her hand to Mr Trinder and he shook it warmly. As he was moving away without his hat, she got up herself and gave it to him at the door of her office. He took it mechanically, and walked away with it dangling from his hand, as if he did not remember what he usually did with it.

Sally spoke to Evans at the porters' lodge on her way to lunch.

'Did Mr Trinder see you this morning?' she asked.

'Yes, Mrs Fulton.' Evans lowered his voice. 'I didn't like the look of him at all. Fair knock-out it's been for him.'

'He came to me. I wasn't quite sure why he was up here at all today.'

'Well, it's like this,' said Evans. 'He made an objection to the post-mortem, but they have to have it, so Mr Wakefield arranged to see him personally to explain.'

'Oh, I see,' said Sally. This explained his vagueness in her office. She added, puzzled, 'But I don't understand why they must have a post-mortem. I thought it was a clear case of pulmonary embolus.'

'They have to make sure in cases of sudden death,' said Evans, pursing his lips. His expression seemed to add that the Lady Almoner ought to know better.

'I suppose so. Yes, of course they do. Only he doesn't look up to bearing any more shocks.'

'You're right there,' said Evans. 'But he'll get over it, to my way of thinking. Very conscientious over his work. Quite put out they wouldn't have him at his office until after the funeral.'

'Was he really!' She remembered that Mr Trinder himself had told her this: it must weigh heavily with him.

As she walked on towards the canteen she wondered if all the fuss about having Mrs Trinder at home really came of the deep and genuine affection between them, or merely of their horror at the idea of breaking a beloved and satisfying routine. Probably both, she thought, a mixture of the two, part of the same thing, if you chose to look at it that way.

She felt nothing but warm compassion for their predicament and their limitations in dealing with it. In her work she had learned not to expect too much of human endeavour.

## *Chapter XII*

MR WAKEFIELD walked into the post-mortem room at the Holmwood General just as Dr Wheelhouse was finishing his examination of Mrs Trinder's remains.

'Sorry I'm late, Wheelhouse,' he said. Though modern informality was universal throughout the hospital, no one had ever called the senior pathologist 'by his Christian name.

'That's all right. I thought you must have been held up, so I carried on. Like to see? You were right, of course.'

Mr Wakefield, not wanting to exchange his white coat for a post-mortem room overall, stood just behind Dr Wheelhouse, while the latter took up the various organs he had removed, and demonstrated the damage.

'Pulmonary embolus. And lucky to get it. Look at this liver. And the kidneys.'

Wakefield nodded his head at the large pale areas of secondary growth.

'Hopeless from the start. And she had no symptoms, poor woman, until it was inoperable.'

'The pelvis is a complete shambles,' said Dr Wheelhouse, waving his long forceps over the affected void. 'I've given Brandon the local recurrence. I think you wanted it put up as a specimen.'

'Well, yes,' answered Wakefield. 'It had one or two unusual features. I thought I'd add it to the collection. I'll just slip into the lab and tell him what I want done.'

He started towards the door, remembering just in time as he reached it, to turn and say, 'Thanks very much, Wheelhouse.'

The pathologist, who by now had left the body to be tidied up by the technician, and was washing his hands,

his back to the door, did not turn round or acknowledge his colleague's remark.

'Surly brute,' muttered Wakefield, not for the first time.

He found the laboratory thinly staffed. Some of the technicians were out on routine jobs in the wards, or next door, in the store for apparatus. The door of Paul Brandon's room in the laboratory, which he shared with the two senior technicians, was open. Wakefield went in.

'Dr Brandon not here?' he asked a girl in a white overall.

'No, sir. He's on a transfusion in Hunter Ward.'

'I wanted to speak to him about a specimen that he took from the post-mortem room a short time ago.'

'It's here on his bench, sir.'

Wakefield gave her a keen glance.

'You know about it, do you?'

Hazel did not answer at once. Then she said, with exact truth, 'He told me to put a cover over it. That's it, at the back of the bench.'

Mr Wakefield uncovered the specimen. He supposed it was the right one, but without a close examination, one untidy piece of tissue was like many others from the same part. He covered it up again.

'He hasn't labelled it. Can you find me a label?'

Hazel knew where the gummed labels were. She watched the neat printing and the quick, tidy, application.

'When Dr Brandon comes in, tell him I want to see him about the bottling. I want it presented in a special way, to show the unusual feature. You're an assistant here, are you?'

She nodded. He had not asked what sort of assistant.

'This was a case where we used radium. She died before the final results had come along. As far as things went it was interesting. Get Dr Brandon to show you, later.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you.'

He turned back at the door of the lab to have another look at this very charming girl. He smiled at her, and she smiled back, a slow, cool smile. He was enchanted.

'Don't forget the message. What's your name?'